

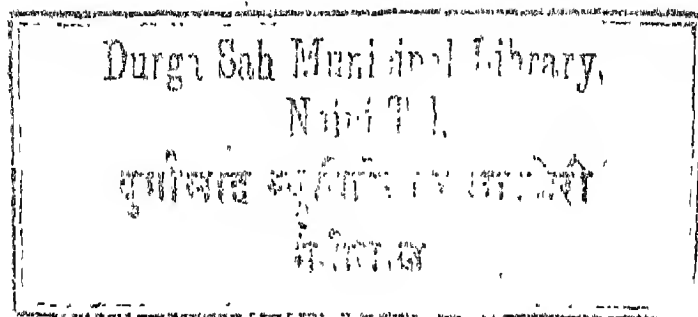
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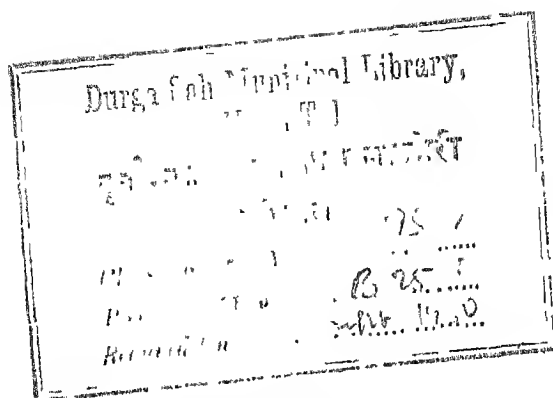
TRANS-SIBERIAN

WITH 11 PLATES IN HALF-TONE



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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
COMPLETE CONFORMITY WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS

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THIS IS THE STORY of a trip across Siberia and Russia just before war broke out, of the people I met, of the views they held, of the lives they lived.

It should, perhaps, have started on the borders of Siberia, where my wife and I actually joined the Trans-Siberian Express; but to get there we had to cross Japanese Manchukuo; and since it seems inevitable that sooner or later the Russians and the Japanese will be at each other's throats—if the Russians are hard-pressed Japan will attack; if the Red Army is victorious Russia will attack—a picture of Manchukuo is important.

Therefore we start, instead of in Siberia, at Shanghai.

Some of the photographs are my own, but I am indebted to the Ministry of Information and to the Society for Cultural Relations between the People of the British Commonwealth and the U.S.S.R. for permission to reproduce others.

NOEL BARBER

CHIEFSEA STUDIO,
S.W.6
August 1, 1942

TO
HELEN
WHO SHARED SO MUCH
AND
GRAFTON
WHO HELPED SO MUCH

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Pictorial Map of the Trans-Siberian Route *Endpapers*

MANCHUKUO MEDLEY

Chapter I

FROM SHANGHAI TO DAIREN, by the way of the Yellow Sea, takes two days—two cold, stormy days in spring, for at that time of the year it is one of the most unpleasant stretches of water to cross within a thousand miles of the China coast. It was seven o'clock on a Sunday morning in the spring of 1939 when Helen and I hurried down to a far corner of the Bund to find a Japanese steamer, the *Tsingtao Maru*, which was to take us on the last stage but one towards Siberia.

Together we had wandered up from the tropics—Java, Malaya, Hong Kong, then Shanghai; a Shanghai looking now uncommonly like Liverpool does at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning. There was even a White Russian beggar, searching the gutters. . . . They caused enormous excitement among the Chinese when they first appeared, though they are quite common now.

But the *Tsingtao Maru*, though small, looked very luxurious, with a charming little cabin, a small reading-room, a very large lounge (insufferably hot), and best of all a small winter garden, closed in with glass. The vessel had an all-Japanese complement of officers and men, who took no notice of us.

This was the first stage of the short trip from China to Siberia. Shanghai, Dairen, Harbin, Manchouli. "I warn you," said a tourist agent in Shanghai, "you won't like travelling on a Japanese boat. The big ones are all right, but the small ones are lousy." But here it was, looking wonderful, and when we first boarded it we felt it was going to be a delightful two days. The ship had everything necessary in the way of appointments, and yet—the tourist agent was right, for the luxury was a blind, like the impressive shop window of a tobacconist who has no stock. It was hard to put a finger

on a single fault, except perhaps the food, which was pretty bad. But there was a general impression that we English were only taken on sufferance—we had the feeling that the Japs may have said to themselves, with an Oriental shrug of their shoulders: "It might cause another incident if we flatly refused to take them." And they weren't ready for an incident then, or we should doubtless have had one.

The food was rotary stuff, the same thing day after day; cold chicken which was tough, wretched meat, and shocking curries; and the service was as bad, for in Japan the women usually do the serving at the tables, and the men who looked after us simply did not know the art of it, while we still had memories of the Chinese. These Japanese stewards had an unpleasant habit of bringing us one glass of water at a time, of taking our plates away before we had finished, or of looking annoyed if we asked for fruit.

And there was nothing to be said about it. Even before the war one of the greatest snags in that part of the world was that if you started getting annoyed with the Japanese they could always refuse to let you go any farther. After all, we were sailing up the Yellow Sea because we wanted to—sailing, too, on a ship run by people for whom I had no liking. (We had very little money, and a Japanese boat was much cheaper than a British one.) We had to put up with what we got. I dare say the Japanese disliked us as much as we disliked them.

Still, I wish I could have been really annoyed on the second day, when I went to the purser and asked him to change three of my American dollars into yen to pay my bar chits and tips. He had no currency on board, he said, and when I murmured quite politely that I thought it was the duty of the purser to change money he just said: "You should have brought Manchukuo currency with you. What did you expect to use on a ship?"

"Nothing," said I quite cheerfully. "I can't give tips, that's all."

She was not built for heavy weather, the *Tsingtao*, and rolled spasmodically up to Tsingtao, the town after which she was named. The swell was heavy most of the time, but that did

not matter, because the sun was shining. There were no other English passengers, but after we had left the mouth of the Yangtse we caught a glimpse of a tall hook-nosed American who was travelling second-class, but quite unashamedly made use of the first-class whenever he wanted to. (I had wanted to travel second, but had been strongly advised that it was unsuitable for women. The American later bore this out.) His name—his Christian name, anyway—was Ben, and our fortunes were destined to be linked with his before long, for he broke the law to help us in Manchukuo.

Our only halt on the way to Dairen, with the weather becoming increasingly worse, was at Tsingtao, which was, I suppose, the Bournemouth of the China coast. From a dilapidated fishing village it has grown into one of the most sophisticated spots facing the Pacific—and America. Nearly half a million people live there, though, naturally, half the sophistication has vanished since it came under Japanese rule. Once it belonged to the Huns as a naval base; then to Japan, who returned it to China in 1922. Now it is Japanese again. But before the Japanese retook it in 1938 the Chinese managed to blow up twenty million pounds' worth of Japanese property. We could see the ruins from the docks.

Even that was nothing fresh. Before the Japanese took it from Germany the Germans burned and blew up everything they could lay their hands on. With typical Teutonic thoroughness, they even carried the bricks away. . . .

After Tsingtao, we had only twenty-four hours to Dairen. We had seen no ice so far, but the weather was now really cold, for we were sailing almost due north most of the time, and heavy seas were making our progress much slower than it should have been. The chairs on the top deck were stiff with frost.

Before we landed I took out the only Manchukuo money I had—ten yen. The yen is worth about ninepence (was!), though the exchange varies considerably. My bar chits came to five yen, leaving me with less than four shillings. Since I could get no more money from the uncouth purser, that had to do for tips, but though it does not seem a great deal, I was

not particularly worried, as an Old China Hand in Shanghai had told us that the Japanese did not like to be tipped. He had given us all sorts of advice on how to see Shanghai, what to do, where to go, how to save money, and though he was always wrong in his advice, he was so insistent on the matter of tipping that I almost believed him.

"Not a sou," he had said in the Palace Bar at Shanghai. "It embarrasses 'em. In fact—and I've had a lot of experience of the Japs—if you offer 'em a tip, nine out of ten'll run away."

Well, that sounded hopeful in view of my financial position, but—victim of a 10 per cent. urge ever since I was old enough to contract debts—I felt I would like to give the steward and the cabin-boy something, even if it were not much.

I called the dining-room steward in and gave him two yen. He did not refuse it. He looked at me a little doubtfully, seemed to shrink a little (his embarrassment) and took it.

"I think he wanted more," said Helen uneasily.

"Nonsense," I laughed. "He didn't want to take it."

I asked the steward to tell my cabin-boy to come in, and to him I offered my remaining three yen. He too took it with an air of extreme doubt, examined it thoroughly, and left. A minute later he came back, knocking apologetically. He was a wizened old fellow who looked about fifty. Holding out the money, he said politely:

"Master give little more please?"

Helen looked quickly into the depths of the suitcase she was packing. "I'm sorry," I said, "I haven't got any more."

He grinned in a sickly way and backed out.

Epilogue. The door-knocker sounded again, and a tiny little Japanese boy of about fifteen poked his chubby yellow face round the door. "Me bath boy, fill your bath, come for tip."

.

There was only one pleasant Japanese on the boat, the second mate, a man called Saito, young, quite charming for a Japanese, and immensely proud of the mercantile marine of Japan. Indeed, talking to him, I realized what I had long believed—that Japan for many years has probably been build-

ing merchant ships just as secretly as she has been building warships.

Saito was quite honest about the great spurt in Japanese shipbuilding. "We are a maritime nation like the British," he started. "You are making a lot of fuss about Japan having too much shipping (we had been doing so in the Commons in 1938), but we need ships as much as you do."

I couldn't argue about that, but then he added, "Anyway, our ships don't clash with yours. We are concentrating on small vessels—tramp ships, coastal steamers. They're only for the China coast—they can't do you any harm."

They have made very useful invasion transports, though . . . I asked Saito if it were true that Japanese shipping is subsidized.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe—like you subsidize agriculture," he smiled politely.

Actually, Japanese shipping has been enormously subsidized for many years, and Saito could not help proudly announcing that for every British ship built in 1938, two had been built in Japan—"only smaller," he added, to safeguard himself. The Japanese Government has for some years paid eight shillings of every pound spent on building ships in Japanese yards for Japanese firms—a price, which, of course, made it quite impossible for British shipbuilding firms to compete. In 1938—the year before we sailed in the *Tsingtao Maru*—Japan built almost double the shipping that we did.

I tried to draw Saito out on the question of small ships (not that I thought then of their possible use as invasion transports, because I never dreamed they would get so far south by sea). But he wouldn't have any. "We have large commitments on the China coast," he said. He bowed politely and left. I sat behind, sipping one of my rare drinks, and I remembered what the Old China Hand had said in Shanghai. "You mark my words," he had said wagging his forefinger. "Every new Japanese ship is designed as a naval auxiliary—otherwise the Government won't pay the subsidy."

But then, of course, the Old China Hand was always wrong. . . .

Our plans were to go straight on through Dairen, but Ben, the American, was staying the night there before leaving for Harbin, so we decided to stay too and have a quick look at a city that hardly existed twenty-five years ago.

As our ship nosed towards land we started striking ice. Large chunks of it were floating, greeny-white, on the waves. Soon there was more, and as we entered the harbour it was almost solid, making a crunching noise as we broke it up. It was the first time I had seen ice forming in the open sea.

When eventually we managed to get ashore—after being kept on board while all the Japanese disembarked first, as they were more important—the wind blew huge clouds of dust all over the place, and even though as we walked we kept our eyes half-closed, they were filled with dirt.

The first place to go was the police-station to get our passports stamped; *nobody, however, seemed very willing to help us, though actually we did not want much help, because we had no money to pay for it.* We were going to pay for our taxi with an American dollar, as we had no change, but I did not fancy paying a dollar just for the privilege of having our suitcases carried for us. We were away from the British touch now; and one of the first things I noticed—it was so marked—was the lack of the usual rush to help a white man. In Colombo or Shanghai, for instance, destitutes are offering to help before you have stepped ten paces off the boat. In Dairen they let you take care of yourself.

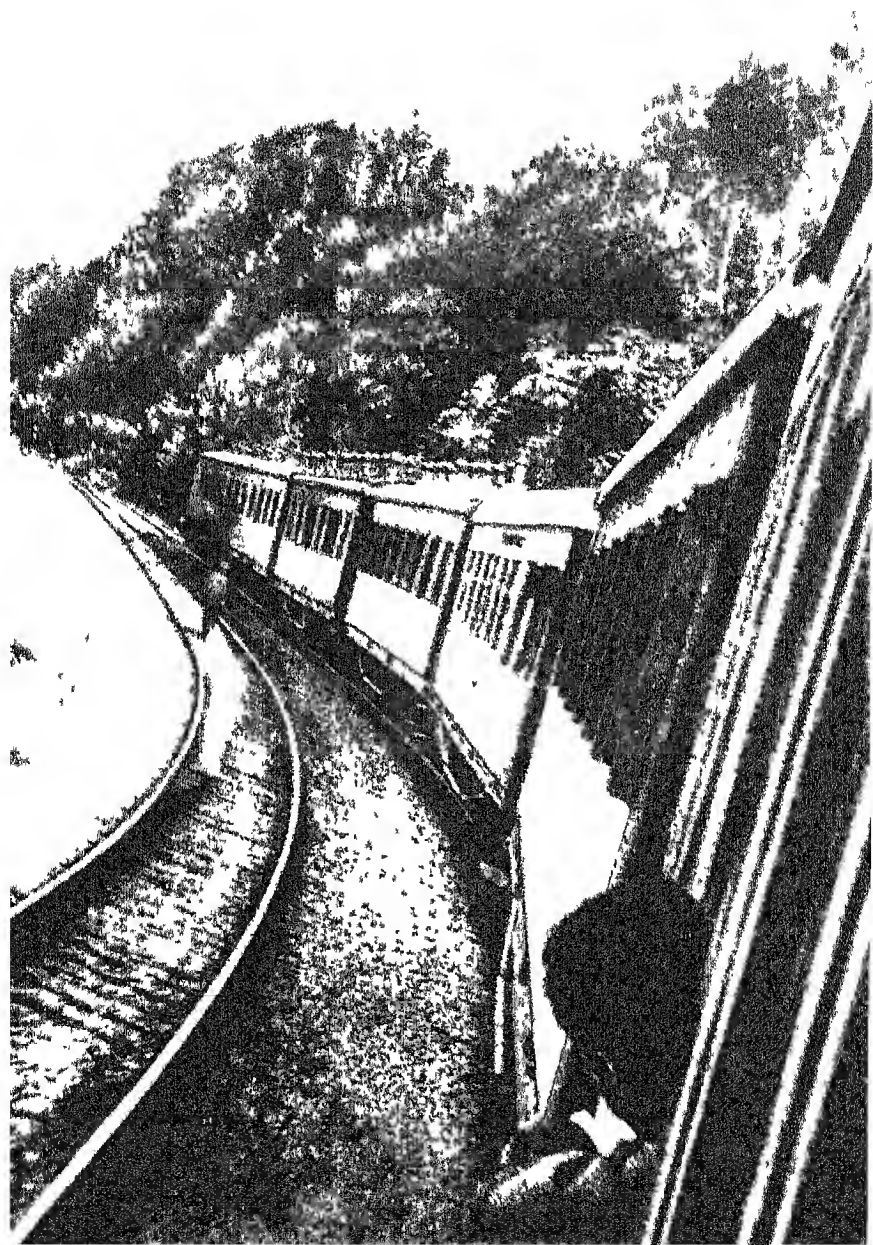
When we got to a taxi-rank we had to wait half an hour. Taxis sped along, stopped at the rank every few minutes, but each time—no matter where we stood—there were always important Japanese officials who commanded the car. They were always surrounded by a few soldiers, who resisted all attempts to push them aside.

It was a difficult problem. I should not like you to think that I stood there shivering with fright, while the Japanese ruled the roost. It was a little more intricate than that, because we all stood in a row on the edge of the pavement, and the taxis invariably drew up opposite the Japanese. As

THIS IS SIBERIA

A typical village we passed.





we rushed towards them—laden with our two suitcases remember—we found our passage halted by hordes of Japanese.

In the police-station we had innumerable forms to fill in. All the way from Shanghai home, we were faced with the problems of customs and police forms that needed racking of brains before we could understand them and remember what we had written on the last one. And half the time our passports were taken away from us, for the old advice that one should never let a passport out of one's sight did not apply. The forms all wanted to know my occupation, and since my passport obligingly stated "traveller," I always answered "None," which usually meant intensive third-degree: where I was born, where did my parents live, and dozens of other stupid questions. Most of the forms had to be filled in in triplicate—plus another batch for Helen.

.

The 'D' in Dairen stands for dust, and the city whose beauty we sought to explore was curtained from us, for all the time we were there the dust was swirling at eighty miles an hour, blinding everything.

Ben once had a friend who was sent to Dairen to work. As soon as he landed he was so impressed with the dust storm that he dashed up to his hotel room, seized pen and paper, and for a long time sat there, writing home, recording his immediate impressions, and his great good fortune in landing bang in the middle of such an amazing phenomenon; a dust storm that, he supposed, happened only once in a blue moon.

"Poor guy," grinned Ben. "I guess he didn't know they have the same thing every day."

But the Japanese—say what you like about them, they are persevering and industrious—have beaten the dust. Dairen is only a quarter of a century old—as old as the Manchukuo railway—and it rests proudly on the business which that railway does. Round that one enterprise the city has sprung, and no port in north China can compare with it, excepting Shanghai. We saw little of it, of course. One night is no qualification

NEAR LAKE BAIKAL
The best scenery in Siberia.

for a Baedeker. But the city is one of the key points of the Manchukuo which the Japanese have remade.

Its centre is a gigantic circle, with wide avenues—dead straight like the spokes of a wheel—leading off to every quarter. And if I was a trifle sceptical when a patriotic Japanese in the hotel told me that you could travel anywhere on a tram for a farthing, that was only because a farthing to a Chinese coolie is half a crown to us: which, I consider, is too much to pay for the modest comforts of these electrical juggernauts.

The same Japanese insisted on taking me from my whisky and soda to look round the million-pound hospital, which is the glory of the populace there. It certainly was a magnificent place. It had a library and cinema, a gymnasium, and at least a dozen operating-theatres, but no Chinese patients.

.

From Dairen we planned to go straight through to Harbin, make a connexion with a couple of hours to spare, and then on to Manchouli, to connect up with the Trans-Siberian; and we started on that journey the next day.

If the wintry sun rose I did not see it. But the dust rose, and that was enough. All day it raged; and in the afternoon it almost stopped us walking to the station, less than half a mile away from the Yamato Hotel, for to close your eyes only half way was useless. For three days afterwards, far into the cold north, we were shaking the dust of Dairen out of our shoes . . . and out of our eyes. I would have given ten shillings for a bottle of Optrex.

In the train making the day's journey up to Harbin I met the only Japanese in Manchukuo with whom I could talk politics. Actually, it was Helen who talked to him first, or rather, he who talked to Helen. He was a handsome fellow for a Japanese, and his slightly American accent betrayed his possible education. I was right. He was a Harvard man. He bowed slightly and offered Helen a rug. It was very cold, and though there had been no snow in Dairen, we were seeing it now—rolling hills were fleeting past the big train windows;

they were brown, but with each mile that we travelled north, the patches of white snow grew larger and larger. In a few hours the red-brown of the earth had disappeared. We were never to see it again until we reached Moscow. A shroud of snow covered everything.

Helen accepted his rug with alacrity. She hates the Japanese as much as I do, but she is essentially a practical woman. . . .

"You like Manchukuo?" asked the Japanese casually, after a little preliminary skirmishing in which he remained true to his Western education and mentioned the weather.

Helen is outspoken, so she said nothing.

"Outside Harbin," persevered the Japanese, "there is a sign at the golf club. It reads, 'No golfers allowed on the course without revolvers'." (That was true. I saw it myself later.)

"We don't need that sign now," he smiled; "we have cleaned Manchukuo up."

I have always felt very bitterly about Manchukuo. I have always felt that if only we had acted in *some* way when the first of the aggressor nations struck we might have averted war now, and Mussolini, looking greedily on, would never have dared to attack Abyssinia, and so give Sir Samuel Hoare and Laval such an opportunity to betray the future of the world with their infamous pact. Besides which, I think the Chinese are one of the finest races in the world. So I still said nothing.

"You don't like it?" He slurred the words together with a queer, half-American intonation. "You know, sir, that sign at Harbin golf-course tells a remarkable story. Look out of the window now."

We were passing a village—peaceful, even if cold and grim in the dusk. There was one street, a few stray dogs, and muffled creatures plodding backward and forward in the snow.

"If it weren't for us," said the Japanese impressively, "Chinese bandits could fire that village whenever they wanted to. Manchuria was a terrible place—but we have wiped out all the bandits. We have made the Chinese safe. The uneducated coolie can live in peace now."

"Doesn't his tax cripple him?" I couldn't help asking.

"It's high, yes," he admitted. "But so is yours. And the Chinese doesn't pay any more to us than he used to do in the old days to the Chinese war lord. But from us, at any rate, he gets protection."

It sounded good. And you certainly don't need revolvers when you play golf at Harbin. Manchukuo has unquestionably been cleaned up.

"All boloney," muttered Ben, the American, after the proselytizing Japanese had gone for his lunch. "I'm not concerned with whether or not the Japs had any right to go and take this blessed country. After all, we can take a look around ourselves, eh? But after you've taken a country, then you've got to make up your mind—are you going to co-operate, or are you going to bleed the place? You don't need to have two guesses to know which the Japanese have done in Manchukuo."

That was true. Though the Japanese have introduced all sorts of reforms in Manchukuo, they have all been done with one end in view—the Japanese end.

At another village we saw small Chinese boys lined up at the station, as a sort of guard of honour to greet our train. "Well, *they* look happy enough," I said.

"Sure," said Ben. "Know what they are? They call 'em Railway Boy Scouts. They're the brighter Chinese boys—their job's going to be to fight Russia. In the Railway Scouts you've got old Hitler's Youth Movement copied to a T. Perfect. Every single thing in this country of Manchukuo has been done for two ends only—one, what the Japanese can get out of it for themselves, and two, preparations for war against Russia. Take these railways. This is the finest railway system in the East. Japan's own railways can't hold a candle to them. Why?"

Troops, of course. We didn't need to be told. Japan has installed one of the finest networks of railways in the world over the brown plains of Manchukuo. As soon as they took over from the Chinese they started on the colossal job of changing hundreds of miles of track so that it could take Japanese rolling-stock—and the Japanese armoured trains,

one of which we saw at Harbin, a grey brute with guns on every side.

This question of railways will become extremely important if or when Japan and Soviet Russia go to war, because the whole weight of any Japanese attacks will surely be directed at Vladivostok on the one hand and at the Siberian frontier, over the Khinghan Mountains, farther west. Vladivostok in itself would be an enormous prize, naturally, but even supposing the Japanese were to capture it, they would be faced with a difficult tract of land, hundreds of miles long, before they could link up with the western Manchukuo-Siberian border. They would almost certainly attack in the west as well, and it would be there that the railways of Manchukuo would become vital. There is no question that there is a better service on the Manchukuo side than on the Siberian side. And since Japan took over Manchukuo in 1932 (or as the Japanese say, "Since Manchuria declared its independence"!) Japanese engineers have laid down an additional four thousand miles of tracks.

The Japanese are amazingly good at copying, and I was told that even before the seizure of Manchukuo the engineers who were in the future going to be entrusted with developing the railway were in the United States studying methods. These boys certainly got a move on—not only with the laying of new tracks, but with the changes in the gauges. Ben told me that they changed the entire gauge between Hsingking and Harbin—that would be three or four hundred miles—in just under three hours. Two thousand men worked on the job, and there was not the slightest interruption in traffic.

In the days before the gauge was changed passengers had to change trains. As soon as the new tracks were in position the Dairen to Harbin trip—the trip we were making—was reduced by five hours. And five hours for a troop train is a lot, particularly as Harbin is smack in the centre of Manchukuo, and an obvious focal point for military activities.

At one village we saw a convoy of buses. They were going off on a journey to another village to which there was no railway. The fleets of buses are operated entirely by the railway,

and special roads have been laid down—many hundreds of miles of them—linking these out-of-the-way villages together. All the buses can, of course, be called up on ‘active service’ the moment war is declared.

I must admit I was immensely impressed with the communications in Manchukuo. The trains were extremely good, fast, modern; the stations at the little villages or the big towns all bore the imprint of recent construction. And since modern war is largely a matter of communications—the shuttlecock battles of Libya have proved that—it is impossible to overestimate the importance of Japanese engineering in Manchukuo.

Of course, you must remember that Japanese troops would have to be fed with guns, shells, and all the accessories of war from Japan itself. Manchukuo has only a small armaments industry; it is mostly concerned with raw materials like coal and soya, which are sent to Japan to be turned into the finished articles. Soviet Russia, on the other hand, has completed a number of small self-contained industrial districts in the Far East, quite near to Vladivostok, in which everything that comes out of the ground is turned into the finished article—and the way these towns are grouped is amazing. Though we missed Vladivostok, we saw some of these industrial districts farther on. The organized planning and working was second to none.

.

Harbin station at eight o'clock the next morning was jammed with soldiers. It was so cold—so bitterly, freezingly cold—that I couldn't go outside the station without a couple of woollen scarves tied round my head. The thermometer read forty-one degrees below zero. The station was an ugly affair of grey stone with half a dozen or so platforms, each one very long. The barriers to most of the platforms were jammed with soldiers, all of them in full war kit, with heavy packs, thick overcoats, and spectacles. Outside, the streets were white—but a very hard white, as though the snow had fallen some weeks before and had never thawed. Actually that was

the case. It only snows twice a year in Harbin. The first time the people get out their winter clothes, for the snow is a herald of bitter weather. Then it is too cold to snow, and the next time it snows the people know warmer weather is on the way and they get their summer clothes ready.

Outside the station there was a broad street along which people trudged dejectedly, and cars skidded amazingly. You never see a car with chains on the wheels in Harbin—it would be an offence to local motoring pride. Most of the cars, too, were open Chevrolets (with the hoods up, of course). There was a single-decker bus outside the station, and a wind was blowing right across as viciously as possible. It did not look a very prepossessing place, Harbin. We did not like it.

The first thing to do was to get our passports franked by the Japanese authorities, and it had to be done quickly, for the train for Manchouli was due to leave in two hours—at ten o'clock. We left our luggage in a corner of the station and then, as Helen had a shocking cold, she went off with Ben to a hotel for some breakfast while I went to the police office on the station.

It was a dingy little room, and sitting before a plain wooden table was a Japanese officer—a military officer. He asked me curtly what I wanted, and I showed him both our passports, and our tickets through Siberia. He examined them, then asked brusquely, "You are going on the ten o'clock to Manchouli?"

I nodded.

"What does this mean? Occupation, traveller?"

I purposely had my occupation described in this way, as I knew I should never get into either Manchukuo or Siberia if I were known to be a journalist. I explained that I was a man of independent means, travelling around, and that I had no real occupation. Black lies, but still . . .

"If independent man, why travel cheap class?" he asked, after seeing our tickets for the Trans-Siberian.

I was not so independent as all that, I said. He hummed a bit. Had I ever done any work? Had I ever earned my living at any time in my life? Was I going to work when I returned

to England? I hoped my imitation of a British nincompoop was fairly good as I shook my head resolutely.

He hawed. More questions.

"Time's getting on," I pointed out, "and I've got to go and collect my wife, who's having breakfast in the town."

"There is no hurry," he announced. "You cannot go by train. Very sorry."

The Japanese are always polite. . . .

"But, my dear man," I cried. "I've got my tickets booked, and I haven't got a penny to spare until I get home". That was true. We had about six or seven pounds between us, that was all, after paying for our tickets.

He wouldn't budge an inch. Perhaps he was just in a bad temper, or perhaps there really were important troop movements which he wanted to keep secret.

At ten to ten Helen and Ben rushed in. They had been looking everywhere for me. Helen had a lovely red nose. She didn't care. Ben tried to argue with the man, until at last the Japanese said, "I think you allowed to go next train."

"Fine!" cried Helen cheerfully. "When's that?"

Ben gave a rueful grin, and said, "Four days."

.

So there we were—flat. True, we had undated tickets through to Germany, but as far as actual money was concerned, we had less than seven pounds. To be stranded at Harbin, of all places, was impossible. I suppose my face showed it.

"Okay!" Ben grinned. "Come on to the hotel, and we'll talk it over with ham and eggs." And Ben—who had just eaten an outsize breakfast with Helen—sat down and ate another one all over again to keep me company.

"Meanwhile," said Ben, between rashes, "you'll just have to taste the delights of Harbin. And don't worry about money. I'll see you straight. I'm not highly paid, but I've got more money than I ever thought I'd have."

Later he told me how. He worked for an American firm with a branch in Harbin and another in England. He had the extraordinary job of buying up sausage-skins ("Casings!"

cried Ben in a horrified voice). If his salary had been paid in Harbin he would never have been able to take a single yen out of the country—regulations stopped that—and when he cashed his salary cheque he would have got fifteen yen to the pound, the rate of exchange *inside* Harbin. Yet the odd thing was that in Shanghai you could buy yen at *thirty* to the pound—exactly twice as many. Don't ask me why this is so. It is the same with roubles. But in order to keep the rate of exchange high, the Manchukuo authorities expressly refused to allow any yen to be imported into the country.

Ben, of course, didn't let that worry him. His firm paid into a Harbin bank just enough to keep him alive—and to give the Japanese no cause for suspicion. The rest he had paid into a bank in Shanghai, and every few weeks he took the boat down there, bought as many yen as he wanted, and calmly smuggled them back.

We were eating in a place called Café Mars, which had little partitions between each table. Ben looked around to see that we were unobserved, then brought out a thick packet from his pocket.

"See what I mean?" he asked.

There were fifteen hundred yen there—which meant a flat saving to him of fifty pounds. "I guess I can spare you a hundred yen," he added. "Just charge everything up to me."

It isn't often you run across men like Ben. Our name meant nothing to him. To give him an address was futile. But he took an instant liking to Helen, and he had the deep romantic interior which so many Americans strive to hide behind their efficient frontages. The idea of our trip appealed to him and he was determined to help us.

(A year later, after we had sent him a bank draft for the money from London to Shanghai, we got a long letter from him. "I feel a real profiteer," he wrote. "I've made pounds out of you two. When I told the people what I'd done—the money I'd lent you—they all wanted to bet me I'd never see my money again. I took 'em all on, so the result is that all last week I've been going around the town waving your draft in everybody's face, and collecting.")

Poor Ben. I wonder what's happened to him now. I hope the sausage-skin supply gave out before the Japanese took Shanghai.

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Harbin is a double city—half Japanese, half Russian. We stayed in the Russian half—a decayed jumble of streets and beards and ice hanging from ancient Russian mouths that dribbled. Our hotel had, in the first flush of its youth, been hopefully christened the *Moderne*, complete with the final 'e'. It was the best Russian hotel in the town, and old-fashioned though it was, we loved it. It was there, or at the *Café Mars* opposite, that we had our interminable talks with the Russians about who would win the inevitable war with Japan. (The Russians, of course. . . .)

We paid fifteen yen a day at the *Moderne* for a bedroom, sitting-room, and bathroom, but no meals, a price at which we could not grumble. The sitting-room had a table and a desk-cum-bureau, and a terrifying, top-heavy affair with a large mirror and a warning about hotel rules printed in four languages. There were inkstands with no ink, paper-racks with no paper, penholders with no nibs. Both the sitting-room and the bedroom were, of course, centrally heated, and we had double windows and double doors, and all the cracks were stuffed up with old newspapers. I don't think a draught could penetrate anywhere.

The bedroom had a double bed and a truly amazing bedside lamp, a tangled mass of brass with a scarlet shade, while the bathroom was noteworthy mainly for a small glass shelf that sloped gently downward, so that one morning my safety razor slipped off and broke; and I lost a good friend, for it was a sixpenny one that had served me well for a year in climates cold and in lands where eternal summers burn.

We got our bags inside—Ben hovering around like a fairy godfather—and, on the basis of our newfound credit, both bought some badly needed clothes. When you went outside the hot hotel the cold air struck you with more violence than if you had plunged into a cold bath. You literally could not

stand still. You could see old Russians smoking pipes with a crust of ice on the stem. Most of the horses in the street had icicles hanging from their mouths. The ground was dangerously slippery, the snow hard and icy.

The first things Helen bought were some thick, high boots which slipped over her shoes, and thick grey trousers and heavy socks. I got a magnificent fur hat with ear-flaps that tied under the chin—I got it, incidentally, for a few shillings, and last year, after using it in the cold spell, I noticed that the moths had been at it in two small places. I took it to a well-known London store, and they said that to restore the fur would cost eight guineas!

Of course, to us, Harbin was amazingly cheap. Living on thirty yen to the pound instead of fifteen makes a difference. . . .

Harbin looked very old, but that was because we lived most of the time in the Russian part. And Russian Harbin is, of course, a city of old men and women. There are very few young Russians—they can't stand it, they leave and strike out for themselves. The Russians there in 1939 were the last of the people who had fled at the time of the revolution. They were seedy, down at heel in some cases, living in the Café Mars, spending their time drinking tea and lemon. The currency restrictions in Manchukuo hit them hard. Many complained to me, including one with the same name as the Russian propagandist—a Mrs Lozovsky. She was a rather nice old woman, always dressed in black, with a lot of heavy old jewellery on—big bangles, big rings.

"What can I do, now?" she asked us at tea-time one morning. "I am an old woman and"—she smiled mysteriously—"I have plenty of money. But these Japanese pigs, they know everything I've got, and they won't let me take it out. So I've got to stay here and—die."

She sipped her glass of tea. "You see? I can't even go away for a holiday. I can only take out a small amount—and outside this wretched little country I haven't a friend in the world."

I suggested to Ben that he should smuggle some currency the other way—out of Manchukuo—but that, he said, was impossible. The Japanese knew every yen in Harbin—whom it belonged to, where it was. All these old Russians could not, of course, go back to the new Soviet Russia—and yet, I felt, talking to them, that they were hoping and praying for war between Russia and Japan just so that—whatever happened to them—the Japanese would get a sound thrashing. The Russian is a creature with a long, long memory—and, whatever his political creed, the memory of the crushing Japanese victory in 1905 still rankles.

Because of its old people, Harbin looked venerable. Yet it was only built forty or fifty years ago; indeed, it really sprang up in 1900, when the Russians decided to start a southern branch of the Trans-Siberian railway. Harbin was the point where they decided to cross the Sungari river by building a bridge, so the town proper immediately rose from a dilapidated conglomeration of shacks in the snow. The Russian pioneers were still building the bridge in 1901 when the Manchurians decided that picking off odd Russians with rifles was a pretty good sport. Russia sent a company of troops to show that they were wrong, and that they should stick to their pheasants instead, and though for three years the Manchurians tried to get them out, they met with no success. Then real war came, and largely because of communication difficulties, the Russians lost it. They lost, too, the railway east and south of Manchouli, on the border of Siberia.

So Harbin started off, half Russian, half Manchurian. Then, before the Japanese took it over, it became the favourite place for Russians to flee to while their own country was undergoing such terrific upheavals. To Harbin the refugees brought wealth, and while their money lasted they turned the town into one of the gayest of the East. During the money boom it was packed with cabarets and theatres and the usual assortment of Eastern vice; then the purses were drained, and the night life went, and the theatrical trains stopped puffing into the station. Now it is really a sorry enough place, like a decayed genteel family living on memories of a past life.

From their own point of view the tragedy of the refugees was that they did not repeat the speed of their flight from Russia. They fled from Moscow quickly enough, but they did not realize when the Japanese took over Manchukuo that they should have fled Harbin too. So now, caught in the Japanese claw, they must stay, some of them with money, but nothing to spend it on except a few Russian restaurants.

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It was rather odd, the feeling I got that the Russians in Harbin wanted war with Japan. I don't think a single person said so to me in so many words. If anybody tried to tie me down to such an opinion I couldn't give a logical reason for my feeling. But it was there. With it there was another feeling, too: that war between Manchukuo and Siberia would be a difficult war for either side to win. Ben lived in digs with an old Russian who had fought, scores of years ago, against the Manchurians as an officer of the Tsar's Army. I suppose he must have been seventy, but he had a mind as agile as a cat, and he spent all his life now studying the high military strategy of a world that hadn't then gone to war!

One night Helen went early to bed with a cold—this cold of hers was getting progressively worse—and I went along with Ben to see this Eastern Liddell Hart. He lived in a little house off Kitaiskaya Street, and had almost the entire walls of one room lined with yellow and faded maps. His prophecies don't matter: I forget them, though I remember one or two were ridiculously wrong. But we had a look at a map of Manchukuo. I don't know whether you have ever seen a relief map of this troublous country, but in shape it is rather like a flat cream-bowl with steep sides and a lip to pour out of. The lip is at the south—the port of Dairen—and most of the way round you get the steep sides of the bowl made up of mountain ranges, with the flat plateau in the middle. Another way of looking at it is to imagine Manchukuo as the face of the clock. If the lip is at six o'clock, and you go round the border clockwise, you follow Mongolia until you come to ten o'clock, and then right round until four o'clock you are skirting

the borders of Siberia. For the last two hours you are next to Japanese Korea.

Our amateur strategist's view was that the future of Vladivostok depended not only on naval action, but on a vital hill called Changkufeng. He pointed it out on the map. It is part of a range that runs from the Korean frontier along the eastern border of Manchukuo, about thirty miles or so from the Japanese military port of Rashin. It looks down on a bay about a hundred miles from Vladivostok at the very tip of Siberia.

"It is the focal point of Manchukuo, Siberia, and Korea," he said, running his finger along the map. "I've travelled over that district many a time. Nobody really knows who owns Changkufeng Hill, for the whole stretch of country has never been properly demarcated. It is dense, hilly jungle and swamp. It dominates most of the railways that run into Manchukuo from Korea. The people who've got Changkufeng have got a great advantage."

Later, of course, we saw the country in the west—the great natural barrier of the Khingan Mountains which run almost from the top of Manchukuo to the bottom, with many peaks of six thousand feet—the highest is actually eight thousand feet. There is a great tunnel through the Khingans leading to Siberia, a tunnel which in the last war the Germans tried to blow up to stop supplies getting through to European Russia. And all along there, of course, there are dotted military outposts—the Japanese on one side, the Soviets on the other. On the Soviet side, facing Manchukuo, you have the big Soviet air-land bases like Spassk, Pogranichaya, Otpor, and so on.

"Of course," said the Russian. "I hope that if Russia ever goes to war with Japan she'll use the Sungari river which, as you know, flows all the way from Siberia into Manchukuo, through Harbin. Have you seen it yet?"

Yes, I had. It was frozen so hard that lorries, cars, and sledges could drive along it, or across its half-mile width.

"The Russian Army," he said, "could send a terrific armoured column right down that river in winter. It's the

finest natural road in Manchukuo. If they got right to Harbin they could paralyse the whole of Manchukuo."

It seemed a good idea. The ice will certainly bear anything in the middle of winter. I told Helen what I had heard when I scrambled into bed and—as is my usual selfish custom—woke her up in the process.

"All very well," she said between sniffs. "But supposing the Japanese used the river first and cut off Vladivostok from the rest of Siberia?"

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"What! Helen's cold is getting worse?" asked Ben when he met me for breakfast the next morning. "Why didn't you tell me? I'll soon fix that. I've got just the thing for it—legacy from my dad—he was a doctor in New York, you know. He used to call 'em dynamite pills. That cold'll vanish in a day."

"I think," I began, "we'll let it take its natural——"

"When I went down to see the big boss in Shanghai," said Ben with the firmness of one who has worked his way through an American college, "the poor guy was almost under the table with flu. I gave him the dynamite, and he came up the next morning as frisky as bob's-your-uncle."

The dynamite was administered by Ben while I was making my morning call at the police-station. I left Helen tucked up in bed, and when I got back she looked up from the white sheets and said, "Well, let's hope they work."

"They! Were there two?"

She gave a sort of shudder. "There were nine!" she announced a trifle weakly.

Nine! Ben, blithely certain that the cure would work, had cheerfully stepped into Helen's bedroom with half a chemist's shop. Three pills had to be taken first, then five minutes' rest before another three, and finally, five minutes later, the last three. When I saw Ben later at the Café Mars he said, "She'll be okay in the morning. Get an extra nightie ready, 'cos in the middle of the night she'll sweat like hell. You'll probably have to take the sheets off too. Might soak 'em

through. But in the morning she'll be as bright as a flea with hiccups."

That night I laid the extra night-dress by the bed, arranged some peeled mandarins on a plate, and got a jug of water. I even bought a few flowers—an impossible price in Harbin in the middle of winter. Then, dreading the interruptions of the night, I went to sleep. I woke when Helen started tossing, and felt her body. It was quite dry. I slept again. Hours later she turned and moved restlessly. She was still dry. The briskly cold morning dawned. And with the dawn came the same old cold. No better, no worse.

"Aw well," grinned Ben, "I guess the cold just couldn't have been bad enough to make the pills work."

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The focal point of Russian life in Harbin was the Café Mars. In its friendly, smoke-laden atmosphere a radiogram played, and gorgeous full-breasted White Russian creatures, dressed in white muslin frocks with little caps, and with faces like naughty angels, served our requirements. There was among them a perfect specimen of a Mongol half-caste, a girl with a beautiful oval face, eyes like almonds, but lovely fair hair clustered about her forehead.

It was an idle place where time was measured only by the next meal, and we could sit there for an hour or two, or even three, for the price of a glass of tea with lemon in it. The Russians, of course, had nothing to do except sit and talk, and wrap themselves well up when they went out after the morning tea. Ben fitted into their existence beautifully, and never seemed to do any work—not while we were there, anyway. And at the Mars we ate really perfect Russian food. A plate of borsch, with a large jug of cream, cost only sixpence. You could get a full meal of pheasant shaslik for a shilling. Vodka was cheap. And you got no Japanese.

I don't suppose there is another city in the world where the division and demarcation between two races is so acute and so rigidly kept. In Japanese Harbin you saw no Russians; nor any Japs in the Russian half. It was interesting to note that

the division was marked not only by people, but by things. In our half all the streets were Russian named, the houses, and shops, too. In the Japanese half there were Japanese flags, Japanese characters on the streets, and so on.

Only once did I see a Japanese in the Russian half, other than an occasional pedestrian passing through. Helen, Ben, and I had gone out one evening to a Caucasian restaurant—a small place of one room in a cellar, where the food was extremely good. It was a gay spot with a small Cossack orchestra, and when we entered the people inside were dancing, of all things, the Lambeth Walk. Stolid Russians with beards and big boots, Cossack bandsmen with alleged cartridges slung round their chests in bandoliers—it made an odd sight: and a rather striking example of an international language which, if properly fostered, might be useful to this world. I have often thought that if only people talked music instead of words there would never be another war.

Half-way through the dance a Japanese entered with his wife. As if by magic the entire atmosphere of the place changed. As soon as the dance tailed off into silence the cheery badinage ceased. Nobody took any notice of the newcomers, who were left standing in the centre of the room. All the tables seemed suddenly to be booked, and when the Japanese did eventually find a table tucked away in a corner there was no service. All the bearded, bullet-headed waiters suddenly seemed very, very busy. After some time the Japanese and his wife got up. Without a word they made for the door. There was silence until it closed behind them. Then the band started to play again, there was a background of chatter, and we were back to normal. It was an astonishing experience.

The next morning I went to see the police again. This time I had a much better interview, though even so I had to 'sell' my case. I expostulated, I argued, I even (politely) threatened. I told them I had no money, whereupon the Japanese officer politely pointed out that I was independent, and surely my relatives would not see me starving? I told him I did not know where they were, and that they were also independent—

very. This was the start of a desperate campaign of lying which must have impressed him, for eventually he admitted that I could quite definitely go on the next train. But he refused to give me my passport back, telling me to report each day. As it seemed fairly certain, however, that I should be able to catch the train, I did not bother to go to the British Consul. I suppose there was one in Harbin, though I never heard anything about him. I did go with Ben to the American Consulate one morning, to meet "the boys." They hailed Ben with phrases like "How'dyc boy?" or "How's tricks, Ben?" Most unconsular. . . .

In Harbin there was not really much to spend money on, and our greatest recreation was sledging on the Sungari river—the river, you may remember, down which it is hoped the Russians will attack Manchukuo. A gigantic slash of water, big enough to take quite a large naval vessel, it flows from Harbin all the way into Siberia, joining other waterways which flow to the sea. At Harbin it is very wide—while we were there, a slice of thick, unbreakable ice, with house-boats and large steamers jammed into immovable hulks near the banks.

Before sledging, we had first to cross the river to some artificially made slides, and crossing the river does not entail walking. Dozens of Mongols in bright clothes wait on the sides of the river with large sledges—squat contraptions which take three people sitting abreast, facing the way the sledge is going. The broad seat for passengers is crosswise at right angles to the two runners, which are the same as on an ordinary sledge, the seat jutting over the sides of the runners. Behind the seat is a small platform on which stands the Mongol, also facing the way the sledge is going. He has a long pole rather like a boat-hook, with an iron spike on one end. Standing up, with his legs apart, he pushes the pole between his legs, digging it into the ice behind him and shoving like a punter. In this way he gets up quite a good speed, whipping you across the Sungari in a few minutes. The speed is not

really fast, but it is fast enough to be exhilarating, and the exhilaration is increased by constant shouting and singing and impromptu races as one sledge tries to overtake another or swerves out of the way of a car careering along the ice.

The Mongols earn about three shillings a day. Out of it they save enough to retire in the summer, when there is no ice. The sledges are mostly owned by one firm which hires them out to each driver, complete with gaudy sheepskin rugs which he could never afford to buy himself.

Right in the middle of the river was a gigantic cross of ice at least twelve feet high, like a tombstone. It had been there some weeks, a strange symbol of an annual religious festival. The Russians shape the cross out of ice taken from the river after they have made a hole in the ice so that they can see the water underneath. As we slowed down to look at it two Russians came out from behind the cross. They were both stark naked. I couldn't have stood half a minute like that, it was so cold. I saw their piles of clothes behind the cross, where they had undressed. Gingerly they stepped round, taking no notice of us, then lowered themselves through the hole in the ice into the water, stayed in five seconds, and came out gasping with icy coldness. They dashed behind, and as we went on they were getting dressed. Religion!

The sledge slide was most intelligently constructed. I have always felt that one of the big snags about sledging is the effort required to mount the incline after the slide has ended, but the Harbinians had neatly circumnavigated this hard labour. At a point where the river was quite wide an enterprising man had built up a solid mass of ice chunks into a squat, square tower. From this, tapering right down to the other side of the river, he had formed a gradual slope, with a number of hazards and bumps and curves to make the journey more exciting. At the other end was a similar tower and slope. For ten cents each we borrowed sledges and sledged as long as we wished. Though not, of course, steep, it was most exciting.

Warm as toast, we stopped after a couple of hours and immediately had to walk sharply to stop shivering, for the temperature was still forty below zero. On the side of the

bank we came to a queer little wooden tea-house inside which it was as hot as an oven. We sat down, took our jackets off, and ate blene, one of Russia's great national dishes. You start with a small pancake about the size of a large muffin. Over this you spread red caviar, then sour cream. They tasted terrible.

There was one big job we had to do before leaving Harbin, and that was provision ourselves for part, at least, of the journey ahead through Siberia. We had been warned that food prices in Russia were pretty stiff, and we had bought in Shanghai a number of food tickets which entitled us to thirty or so meals, I think, whenever we gave them up. To supplement this, we decided to take as much food as we could conveniently carry.

"I know the place to get the stuff," said Ben. "It's called Tschurins. Let's take a taxi."

I had never been in a Harbin taxi before, though I had seen them and gazed bewildered, for all taxis in this strange city were open five-seater Chevrolets, with the hoods and side curtains up. I like to think of the pushing American salesman who descended on Harbin one day and promptly sold the ice-bound community a fleet of open cars that he could not get rid of anywhere else. (Actually, this was not really fair: you must remember that the Sungari on which we sledged is a popular bathing resort in summer.)

We stepped into a taxi and skidded off on the icy road. In three minutes it stopped by the side of the road, the door was opened, and a woman got into the back seat with Ben and myself. I looked at Ben, but he only grinned. Not until afterwards did he tell me that taxis ply in just the same way as buses, along a set route from one end of the city to the other, taking up to five passengers at ten cents a time irrespective of distance.

At Tschurins we bought all sorts of goods. We started off with things like four dozen oranges, a number of slabs of local-made plain chocolate, tins of sardines, pounds of biscuits, packets of sugar and tea, some loaves of nearly black bread, and a lot of tinned fruit. We bought a teapot and a thermos

flask and a couple of cheap cups and plates and one knife and fork—and of course a tin-opener, together with a crown-cork opener for some beer we hoped to buy at Manchouli. We couldn't get all this provender into our suitcases, so we made them up into parcels with carrier-bags—there must have been a dozen of them, and all the way across Siberia we carted a diminishing number with us. It was well worth it—we could never have afforded three square meals a day once we left Manchukuo. Lastly we bought a couple of hundred filthy Manchukuo or Japanese cigarettes, wretched in quality, but ridiculously cheap. I was determined not to go short of cigarettes on the journey. We also bought a set of chessmen for the journey—a purchase which proved to be an open passport on the Trans-Siberian.

The end of our stay was drawing near. On the last night we went with Ben and a few friends to Gambrinos, which Ben described as the "only classy joint" in town, but which was a very dull affair with a few White Russian prostitutes in one corner and a few English bank clerks looking at them instead of at their wives. I would rather have spent the last night at one of the small Russian cafes, but it couldn't be helped. Then, for the last time, we went to bed at the Moderne, and turned out the incredible brass lamp.

The next morning we had to be up bright and early. Ben was there for a farewell breakfast of bacon, two eggs, and a piece of roast pheasant—quite an interesting mixture.

In the course of a brief but busy life I must confess I have always found lingering farewells embarrassing affairs. You kiss and then wait with a pent-up sigh of relief for the engine to snort and move. But if it does not—then you are back where you started. The loved ones draw to the carriage door again. You squeeze out the other people who have just as much right as you to poke their heads through the window. Looking anxiously at the engine and then at you, the loved ones maintain a rapid and slightly hysterical conversation, while surly looking passengers who have no loved ones watch unblinkingly from the nearest possible vantage-point.

At least that could not happen in Harbin. We were late

leaving, but Ben had long since gone. Two minutes of standing on that cold, bitter platform would have frozen anybody. So we said good-bye briefly. He kissed Helen, then we saw his lanky, loose figure striding down the station steps.

Siberia ahead.

GATEWAY TO THE U.S.S.R.

Chapter 2

COVERED WITH ICE AND SNOW, a shivering ghostly monster, our train steamed out of Harbin station and across the iron girders that spanned the Sungari river. Inside, the attendants had turned on every heat cock to its maximum; it was as warm inside as it was cold out, making my two vests, two pairs of pants, two shirts, my polo pullover, thick trousers, and heavy boots quite unnecessary.

Yes, I did wear all that, finding out by bitter experience in this climate that it was not enough to *seem* warm; one had to *be* warm. Never having been in a country where the mercury persisted so regularly in hiding below the zero mark, I made the fatal mistake at first of thinking that the great thing was not to feel cold, and I never connected this with the fact that I had regular and unpleasant attacks of stomach trouble. Then I suddenly wondered if it were because I had not got enough round my loins. And the very day I wrapped my bottom half up properly my troubles vanished.

The journey to Manchouli was a replica of the journey to Harbin, an uninteresting trip, for Manchukuo is a dismal enough country in winter. White, white, white, with occasional splashes of brown where the earth showed through its sheeted shroud. Everywhere looked desolate and poverty-stricken. Villages were few and far between: odd oases of humanity in this desert of forlorn hope. The houses in the villages were nothing more than clusters of mud huts, and from one or two in every village smoke trickled through a hole in the roof: the only fires apparently, for it was difficult to see where man could get fuel. Of trees there were none except a few stunted, wind-blown skeletons, bent like old women where the wind had slaughtered their growth. A desolate country, with every miserable hut surrounded by a strong

wall, the sole precaution against the bandits who swooped and burned the villages until the Japanese swooped instead. More than once we saw ruined heaps of stone where a small village had once existed; only a few ashes and a heap of ruins marked their funeral pyre.

Occasionally, too, we could see a single Manchurian walking along a stretch of trackless white, no humanity, no civilization within miles. What was he doing? Where was he going? As our train laconically passed the trudging figure wrapped in sheepskins we could see his breath coming out like a cloud of steam. Funny to see those old men, their civilization bounded by a few square miles of snow and a train which they saw regularly as it passed on its way to a life they could not even dream about. I felt I should like to stop, select one at random, pack him into the train, and take him to London, just to see his reactions. But there he is. Still trudging his few square miles, still seeing the train that puffs on to the edge of his world—the horizon—and beyond.

There was another 'foreigner'—Shanghai name for white people—on the train. When we went into the restaurant-car for a meal a strong-looking man was already at work on his food, attacking it with a vicious intensity that immediately stamped him as a German. He wore glasses, and his bald head was as shiny as an apple. He spoke in a terrific voice, shouting his words across the compartment, to the obvious consternation of the Japanese toying delicately with their pale green tea.

"I think we'll steer clear of him," I whispered to Helen. But no. Turning from a gigantic bite of meat, he caught sight of us.

"Ha!" he shouted, and got up, coming across. "This is a fine splendid day, and my name it is Kissling." He was wearing a rust-coloured pullover and plus-fours of the same colour. "I commenced thinking we should know each other. We are the foreigners. My name it is Kissling. Yours is——?"

"This," I started mildly, "is my wife, Mrs Bar——"

"Ha! I like to knowing you, Mrs Barr. I commenced liking you already. We shall be friends."

"Thank you," I said a trifle blankly.

Not being a novelist, I cannot keep up this dialogue unendingly. But until we parted it was maintained. Those harsh guttural snorts, those sudden screeching 'ha' sounds, were incredible. Not that he was an unpleasant old man. He was not, and we got to like him very much after we had become acquainted with his German-cum-English.

He had one curious characteristic. He invariably wore two hats at once. Now this is no exaggeration, calculated to make you puzzled. It was as simple as that. I never saw him outside the train, not even for a second, unless he was wearing two ordinary felt Stetson-type hats, one on top of the other, so that they made a two-tier contraption rather like a pagoda. One hat was brown, the other was grey.

Why he indulged in this extraordinary whimsy we never discovered. Once or twice I tentatively approached him on the question; indeed, at one Siberian station where we halted I actually put my own hat on the top of his to the great delight of the Russians, already intrigued enough by his plus-fours which were hanging down one leg, as he had not fastened the buckle properly.

But Kissling only laughed, and cried "Ha! Was dey watching me close? Went over strong, eh? So it's all good, no harm done. I like two hats, oddawise I wear one."

But that was later.

After passing through the tunnel that penetrates the Khinghan Mountains, we steamed into Hailar for a few moments. Hailar, when war comes to Manchukuo again, is likely to be almost as important as Harbin, for whereas Harbin will be the central point for the whole of Manchukuo, Hailar will probably be the focal point for the western spring-board of any Japanese aggressive tactics.

It is the middle of all the little fortresses that dominate the Manchukuo-Siberian frontier—fortresses and outposts which it would be foolish to underestimate in time of war, for Japan has perfected an astonishing line of communications linking them all together. In Hailar station we saw two or three

troop-trains puffing away from the platform. Japanese soldiers packed them like sardines on end. They were quite a cheerful lot, and their equipment and dress was rather interesting. Reports from the tropical battle-front seem to indicate quite definitely that the Japanese have been travelling light—like German shock troops, they are stripped for action, and carry absolutely no unnecessary equipment such as ridiculous haversacks stuffed with spare clothes and things—these are always brought up behind the shock troops on lorries, as they should be.

In winter, however, the Japanese couldn't travel as light as that—the weather conditions made it quite impossible, and the Japanese soldier of Hailar, obviously going back to the Soviet frontier after leave in Japan, reminded me rather of the caricatures of scruffy European soldiers of the last war. They wore a thick, khaki-type of tunic, with puttees which they never seemed to be able to roll properly, and a pack with a coat over the top. I noticed quite a lot of them in the station were not wearing their coats, even though it was bitterly cold. Many of them, on the other hand, were laden with varying cooking-utensils, and mugs hanging from their belts—which indicated that, in the winter anyway, the Japanese needed more than a mere handful of rice. I mention these small points merely because they might be pointers to a different form of fighting, say in an Australian winter.

It was at Hailar, too, that we saw yet another Japanese armoured train. They are rather different from Russian armoured trains, one of which we were to see later on. The Soviet trains were heavier, and more powerfully armed. The Japanese relied more on small, three-truck trains with an engine in the middle—a special engine which could travel pretty well as fast in either direction, so that the train was extremely mobile. They were armed mainly with machine-guns. The one in Hailar station had four machine-guns in the front van, which was armoured on all sides, with slits for the noses of the guns, while in the back coach there was a heavier anti-aircraft gun and two machine-guns.

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So on to Manchouli, which seemed little better than the mud villages we had passed on the way. It had stone houses, true, and a station with a waiting-room and a restaurant, but it was a poor enough place. Manchouli is the last frontier outpost of the Japanese, and it is twenty minutes away from Otpor, the last frontier outpost of Soviet Russia on the western borders of Manchukuo. Who owns that twenty minutes of land I am not quite sure, though the Trans-Siberian, which had started a couple of days or so before at Vladivostok, steams right into Manchouli station.

We got there at about midday and had a couple of hours to wait for the Soviet train, though we were not allowed to leave the station, guards being posted at all exits to watch the foreigners. As well as Kissling and ourselves, there were three nuns, close and diminutive, whom we had not seen before. So we spent the time tramping up and down the snowy platform, wandering in and out of the waiting-room (which was not heated), and at last went into the restaurant, where we had a surprisingly good meal for less than a couple of shillings. At the restaurant all sorts of things were for sale—including whisky, with a perfect replica of Johnny Walker's well-known label on the bottle—just a plain, deliberate swindle. There were phoney Player's cigarettes, and *ersatz* Fry's chocolate. We bought quite a lot of last-minute provisions, not because they were particularly good, but because we were not allowed to take any of our last remaining yen out of the country.

Half an hour before the train came in the Customs people got to work on us pretty thoroughly, unwrapping our boxes of sugar, sorting out and examining our provisions; they even made Helen unpack a box of powder, and one of them felt inside the powder with a yellow finger. Even so, we got off lighter than did old Kissling.

"Dey don't like Germans," he shouted. "Dey make it very orked, but I select dis way to come, so I noddings can say."

He was right there.

When we walked out of the Customs shed the Trans-

Siberian was already drawn up in the station. Men with axes were chunking away at pieces of ice on the springs and the buffers . . . last-minute preparations for a trip through a wilderness. There were icicles all over it, icicles and snow. Soviet guards hopped off each coach, passengers tumbled out and stretched themselves, breathing great clouds of steam into the cold air. Most of them were Soviet soldiers, our first chance to inspect them, to see them at close quarters, to see the clothes they wore, the food they ate, the cigarettes they smoked.

The Trans-Siberian has three classes—first, soft, and hard. Soft, which we were travelling, is better than third (mainly because there are a few two-bunk compartments), but it is much less comfortable than first. Looking round for the right door to enter, we saw old Kissling climbing heavily into a first compartment. He was talking to a man we had not seen before—a small, thin little man with pink eyes. He spoke fluent German, and must have come from Vladivostok. He looked ill.

At last we found an Intourist porter who could speak a few words of English. He took a look at our tickets and begged us to follow him, carrying one suitcase each. The soft coach was next to a hard coach, and as we started to clamber aboard the three nuns were getting into the next compartment, their voluminous black frocks brushing snow off the side of the carriage doorways. I had not noticed them before, but now one of them smiled at Helen. She was old, with a rather pleasant face. The second was old; but old and stern. And the third . . . as the Intourist man helped Helen aboard I looked straight into the eyes of the third nun. She couldn't have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four, and she was lovely; and as I looked at her, not knowing whether to smile or not, she blushed. She turned her eyes away quickly, but her face was pink. I followed Helen, vaguely disturbed.

I am glad we travelled soft class, because we were lucky, and we got a compartment for two—the only double compartment in the coach; all the others were for four. It was an exciting feeling, a very exciting feeling, putting the bags down,

looking around, thinking that here was our home for a fortnight. The compartment was about six feet by three, with two bunks one above the other. There was a strip of frayed carpet on the floor, a small table, a table lamp, a heavy glass ash-tray with the hammer and sickle on it, and a wash-basin that never worked for the whole of the trip. That was all.

"Well," said Helen, "so this is it."

I looked at her and grinned. We had carried our two suitcases in, but there were still all the carriers of food to fetch, the teapot, the thermos, the bread, beer, and biscuits. "You get things sorted out," I said; "I'll go and collect the rest of the stuff."

Fortunately, over the corridor there was a big cubby-hole which we promptly made into our pantry, arranging as neatly as we could all our provender. When I got back with the last carrier the compartment was a home from home. On the small table Helen had put out cigarettes and our travelling-clock, while on the little rail by the useless wash-basin was her powder and all the other accoutrements of modern make-up. My slippers were on the floor by the side of the bed. And as I stood looking at the domestic scene in miniature there was a whistle and a jolt, and the Trans-Siberian started on its way to Moscow.

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Inside the train was beautifully warm, and as it curved along the track I could see through the double windows Manchouli fading away in the background. It was only twenty minutes to Otpor, where we had to go through the Customs all over again, neither the Japanese nor the Russians (quite rightly) trusting the other.

Pulling the sliding door of our compartment back, I peeped out into the corridor. There were not many people about; one or two Russian soldiers lolling against the windows, looking idly at the snow fleeting past, a woman standing all by herself, a child crying somewhere. At the other end of the corridor I thought I caught a glimpse of the man I had seen talking to Kissling—the man with the pink eyes.

"I'm getting hungry," I said to Helen when she joined me in the corridor.

"I wonder if the food's any good in the restaurant-car?" she asked softly.

Staring out of the window was a tough, taciturn-looking Russian soldier dressed in a blouse and blue trousers. His hair was fair and rather long. He was chewing something with evident relish, and as he heard Helen speak he looked round with his mouth half-full, and without a smile, said in clipped English, "Not very."

That was how we met Alexandrov.

At Orpor we all had to get out of the train for the Customs—at any rate, all the people carrying foreign passports did. When we had carried out all our belongings Kissling was already half-way through his examination. The station was noticeable mainly for two things—a huge picture of Stalin fixed to the roof of the biggest building with a Red Flag waving over the top, and a radio that was blaring at full strength from some hidden recess—the ubiquitous radio which we were to hear at every station or wayside halt throughout the length of Siberia and Russia.

"Mrs Barr!" cried Kissling. "Let me introduce my friends yes, who is also coming from Germany back," and he pushed forward the little man. "He is a German, but he has lived in London."

The man's name was Hansen. He came from Kiel. He was the most cynical German dupe I have ever met, and I have met many. He didn't tell us then, but he must have known that he was going back to Germany to die—the queer pink in his eyes told the tale of repeated malaria attacks only too well. He spoke very good English. He had lived in Hampstead for two years, but he was an undernourished, fragile little man who looked far older than his thirty years.

"De customs, dey examines me outside in," said Kissling, feeling to make sure that both his hats were on his head.

If they did they treated us much better, because, though they

were thorough, they were not too finicky, and let us get through fairly quickly, so that we were among the first back in our compartment with all our baggage. I saw the nuns again . . . the young one . . . the blushing nun. "You're flattering yourself," said Helen when I told her. "Go and get the teapot."

For it was at Otpor that we got our first taste of Communist service for all. Free boiling water. Down by the Customs shed there was a man sheltered from the snow—it was snowing in Otpor—with an urn of boiling water, free for anybody who wanted it. Helen put some tea-leaves in the pot, and I went to stand in the queue. When my turn came the big brown pot we had bought for a shilling in Harbin was filled to the brim. I dashed back with it, poured it into the thermos flask for storage purposes, then back into the queue for a second brewing for immediate use. And that—all the way to Moscow—was how we got our free tea. Our teapot was the most sensible thing I have ever bought in my life.

As the train started again Kissling came to hunt us out, bringing Hansen along with him. Kissling had got his chess set, but at the sight of tea he put it away, and the four of us had a real English afternoon tea-party with biscuits as well. Poor Hansen. I won't weary you with his woeful arguments ("When *will* you British understand that Hitler will never go to war!"). He was a last-war child, of course, and extremely bitter about it. We starved all the Germans, and he, from the earliest days of his life, had never had a real chance. He had been a weakling, he had always been ill, and then, out in China (where I expect he was running a Bund) he had got malaria so badly that they shipped him home as white cargo. With his constitution, nothing could save him now. He was doomed. I could tell that he knew it from his slightly hysterical attitude to life. I only hope he died before the war started.

"Of course der war will come," shouted Kissling. "It will not be Hitler, it will not be the English. It will be the armaments kings—I would do the same myself if I made guns. Only I make chocolates."

He did. The best in Peking. His chocolates were quite

famous throughout China. He was married to a German who preferred living in Berlin with their only child, but Kissling loved the delicate touch of Pekin too much to settle down to the rigid austerity of Hitler Germany. "And," he said to me one day with a broad, Prussian wink, "I am—what do you say—married the time and a half, in China as well, yes?" I must say I would prefer the delicate contours of a Chinese girl to the rugged grandeur of a German Frau. I couldn't blame him.

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That night, with a recklessness that has been my chief joy throughout a brief but varied life—I was only twenty-nine at the time this trip was made—Helen and I both threw financial caution out on the Siberian steppes, and ate in the restaurant-car. We had the meal tickets which I mentioned, and which entitled us to one meal a day each, the tickets being a concession to travellers by the Soviet Government because of the high price of food on account of currency restrictions. I can never get to the bottom of these currency problems, but the position on the Trans-Siberian was this. We had about six or seven pounds—actually, for convenience, the money was in United States dollars, so that we could change smaller units. The rouble worked out at about a shilling, or twenty to the pound. Yet in Shanghai you could buy roubles at fifty to the pound sterling. You could not, of course, take any of this Shanghai currency into the country, and if you tried to smuggle it through it was not much good, because there was a pretty thorough check on every rouble that you spent. For instance, Kissling told me one night that he bought a bottle of wine, and at the next station, in conversation with an English-speaking Intourist man, he was asked how did he enjoy it.

The trouble with this artificial stepping up of currency, however, was that it made the prices colossal—to us. If a Soviet workman and his wife are each earning, say, four hundred roubles a month a few spent on food means nothing to them. But ten roubles—ten shillings—for a very ordinary two-course meal was quite impossible for us. So the Soviet

Government issues to each passenger a certain number of food tickets, which can be bought outside Russia or Siberia for about half a crown each.

The meal that night was not particularly good, but it was a jolly affair. We made our way through coach after coach to the restaurant-car. As the train clanked and jogged along we could see, as we stepped from one carriage to another, ice, hard as a rock, between each coach, on the chains and cables joining the coaches to each other. It was bitterly cold as we stepped over this small platform, under which we could see the rails slipping past swiftly; though inside, the train was extremely hot.

Hansen was travelling hard class, and we picked him up on the way. He was in a four-bunk compartment, two of the other bunks being occupied, one by a Soviet soldier, the other by a Russian woman, whom Hansen eyed disdainfully, because she had a baby with her that kept crying. Near to Hansen were the nuns also travelling hard-class. They shared their compartment with a soldier. "They're Swedes," said Hansen.

We carried two big bottles of beer along with us—we certainly couldn't afford to *buy* beer, because it was a fabulous price—and in the restaurant-car Kissling was waiting for us. We all had borsch of a very poor quality—nothing like the borsch we had been accustomed to eating in Harbin. We had borsch pretty well all the way through Russia, because it was the only Russian word I knew.

The compartment was crowded with Soviet soldiers, and in a corner was the officer who had spoken to us in the corridor. I smiled, but he took a look at Kissling—if ever there was a hand-painted German it was Kissling—and I fancy I saw the corner of his lips curl. At any rate he did not smile back.

After the borsch we had tinned fruit and a glass of tea with lemon. We made it spin out a couple of hours. By the time we had finished it was dark, and we made our way back to go straight to bed. Kissling went off to his first compartment, doubtless to snore with true Teutonic gusto, and we dropped Hansen on his hard wooden berth—in the hard-class you have to provide your own mattress and bed clothes; you just have

a wooden bench to lie on. The nuns had closed their sliding door. I wondered how they were getting on with the soldier!

Our beds had been made since the train started, and we soon jumped into them. We were both very tired. The radio that was installed in every coach corridor was blaring, but even that could not keep us awake. The train rumbled and jolted along on its way to Chita. We fell asleep to the music of the wheels.

PORTRAIT OF A RED OFFICER

Chapter 3

ALEXANDROV, THE SOVIET OFFICER, was twenty-eight. He was a little on the short side, with that stocky, solid build you see so often in Russia—he looked as though every muscle in his body had been toughened and tightened, and that he could stand any amount of punishment. He was clean-shaven, and he had a snub nose—he should have laughed with that snub nose, but he never did. He was very solemn and quiet, and his speech was usually laconic and to the point. I think he preferred to listen, standing or sitting, drinking our glasses of tea.

His hair was a nondescript sandy colour and—oddly enough in the Soviet Army—quite long, so that he had to keep on brushing it back with his fingers. He was leader, friend, judge, and (if necessary) executioner of a small unit that had for some time been stationed at an army infantry depot in Eastern Siberia. He was a captain, and his career was typical of many of the younger officers in the peace-time Soviet Army—for remember, officers in peace-time were hand-picked men.

Alexandrov's father worked in a car plant on the banks of the River Volga before the last war, and fought all the way through it; and during the civil war he joined a guerrilla detachment which worked in co-operation with the Soviets. He was caught by White Guards—and he was shot.

At that time one of Alexandrov's brothers was earning fairly good money in Moscow, and after the Revolution Alexandrov and his mother moved to the capital, and Alexandrov went to the school attached to his brother's factory. Even before he went to a secondary school he had decided that he wanted to become an Army officer.

The officer in the Red Army must have a secondary school education (doubtless changed now that Russia is at war) and

must follow this up with at least four years at a military academy. Before Alexandrov had left his secondary school he was already attending military training classes—these were not unlike our old O.T.C. training units. At eighteen he left school and went to the Moscow military academy—one of about seventeen similar institutions that existed in Russia and Siberia in 1939.

Of those four years he told us little. I imagine that the training was fairly similar to that which our cadets get at Sandhurst, excepting that Alexandrov doubtless got a lot of political training as well—it was astonishing how, all the way through Siberia, he and other Soviets would come out with the most naïve political clichés, spoken quite casually and quite believably, but also quite obviously picked up from a political text-book.

We did not learn all about him at one sitting, of course. But we became great friends, and he was always in and out, and always being questioned, and though he would tell us little about the training of Soviet officers (I can't say I blame him), he was as generous as he could be with his information.

Four years he spent at that military academy. "They teach you every single thing you want to know there," he said one day. "Everything, that is, about the arts of war." It was there that he had learned his excellent English too, though I didn't ask him whether *that* was one of the arts of war—at that time Russia and Britain weren't quite so officially friendly as they are to-day.

At twenty-two his training was complete. He was given a Red Army commission—starting as a junior lieutenant: there are three lieutenants in the Red Army, junior lieutenant, lieutenant, senior lieutenant, and then, of course, captain. It had taken him four years to reach the rank of captain, or rather three and a half years, because he had been a captain for six months when we met him.

"I should have got earlier promotion," he said, "but unfortunately I never got into the fighting line. There is one very big difference between the Russian and British armies. We very often get quick promotion for some individual deed of

valour. If a junior officer leads his men in a successful attack he gets as well as a medal a jump in promotion—perhaps from senior lieutenant to major or something like that.

"That is, after all, much better than a medal—because it means that you are recognized by getting a better salary and a better position."

All through the skirmishing with Japan he had been stationed in the Far East but out of the battle zone; he was very sullen about that. He had been all the time watching Japanese troops over the borders of Manchukuo—and hoping for the brush that never came.

"Now I expect it will come," he said sombrely, "because I am going to Moscow to be married. It is usually the way."

He had a *very* dry sense of humour.

I asked him what leave he was getting, and he said a fortnight—"But that doesn't matter," he added, "because I shall be taking my wife back with me."

Was it a good idea taking a wife from Moscow to Siberia? Yes, apparently it was, because, as Alexandrov explained, the Red officers do not have batmen like their British prototypes, and though they do not have brass buttons either, there was a great deal that a woman could do at an army outpost to make the life of a junior officer more bearable.

Indeed, as he said, the wives of army officers had a very important part to play, because they were in almost all cases the self-appointed welfare officers of the men—the men who, off duty, were Alexandrov's colleagues.

"The other junior officers stationed with me," he said, "are all married, and each of their wives looks after a unit's hut. In the summer they arrange flowers and special shows and so on. In winter they fix up with Moscow and other big cities to get books and magazines out.

"One of the wives used to be a schoolmistress—she takes a class every other day. Three-quarters of my men attend them. Another one was a singer, and she arranges musical parties. My wife has no especial talents," he said, but added very solemnly, "though I expect she will be very good at looking after her husband."

I didn't suspect Alexandrov of propaganda—he was one man in Russia who never tried consciously to pump anything into me, though now and again, as I say, he came out with some obvious dope that he had lapped up somewhere.

But I should imagine, from talking with him, that wives do play an important part in the lives of the men. They do in this country, too, of course—but here there is always a certain barrier that can never be overcome. The women usually look down on the men, and the men refuse to look up to the women—a fact which can make things a bit awkward. There must, of necessity, be a little more equality in Russia, though it would not be right to think that this exists everywhere, because Red Army soldiers are, after all, usually the mental inferiors of their officers (ordinary school as opposed to secondary school and academy) and that immediately puts up a slight cultural barrier. On the other hand, it must be remembered that most of the Russian Army officers' wives had some profession before they were married—you can imagine the wholehearted pleasure they would get in doing some sort of work if they were sent with their husbands to the back of beyond.

I often wonder what Alexandrov is doing now. He was in many ways the finest type of Russian I have ever met—naturally as his father had been shot by the Whites, he was very pro-Communist, but with it he was very balanced. And he had a trick of coming out with the most unexpected sayings when you least expected them.

We were talking about batmen one day, and he said, "We consider that batmen are old-fashioned slaves. Our soldiers like bayonets not boot brushes when they join up." (At the same time, judging from the alacrity with which our train guard accepted a dirty old shirt from me at the end of the trip, I can imagine many a Red soldier brushing his commander's boots for a little extra.)

When I asked him why he—an officer—was travelling soft-class his reply was, "All over the world second-class is cleaner than first." It was true on the Trans-Siberian, because you cleaned your own compartment every morning!

About discipline: "One of my great friends is a private in my battalion. We go out together and study together. But on duty he obeys my orders unquestioningly—we have far stricter discipline than you do in your country. I have complete authority to deal with any crimes. I can shoot any of my men. I haven't shot any yet."

Of his men: "The small unit is the secret of any army. The junior commander is the key man. We believe in small units so that, however badly a big operation may go, the small units can carry on. A strong small section of officers and men who know everything about each other is the basis of the Red Army. And the officer must lead them. He must always go in first."

That is quite true. This war has proved, in the case of Germany, too, the value of the captain and higher ranks, who go at the head of the column into battle. In tanks especially, many German generals go into battle in the first and foremost tank, so that operations are actually directed by a man on the spot instead of by a man ten miles behind the line with a lot of fancy maps and a radio set.

Yes, he was a great fellow, Alexandrov. Just before we left the train at Moscow he gave me a little gift—very charming of him I thought; it was an ash-tray with the hammer and sickle on it. "Will they shoot you when they see that at the English customs?" he asked solemnly. . . .

Of course some of the things he said have changed since those days. Now that there have been heavy casualties on the Eastern front, thousand upon thousand of N.C.O.'s in the Red Army have become officers—and have become magnificent officers too, whereas Alexandrov had enough class distinction to emphasize over and over again that only the trained man was good enough to be an officer—that you must have the military equivalent of a university course before you could take a commission.

He argued that leading a unit of soldiers was not only a highly responsible job in war-time, but a job of high quali-

fications and that since the Soviet Government paid officers at the same rate as they paid skilled factory executives, it was only right that they should receive intensive training. He was very firm on this, because we had a lot of friendly argument about it—he quite openly despised the territorial backbone of the British Army—the men who really joined the Army as officers in peace time for a bit of fun and went to camp for a fortnight and then, when war came, frequently became captains before they had been on active service more than a month or two. Many of those captains have turned out to be magnificent leaders of men in this war, and my main argument was that a leader of men will always be one, and that a soldier's first battle is his best university course if he can only survive it. But he insisted that technical training over a period of years was absolutely necessary. Class distinction? Of a sort, I think. . . .

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Soviet officers, he said, get no extra allowances when they are married, whether their wives go with them or not. "We are paid well enough," he added. "The men get no allowances for their wives and very little for themselves. I don't see why we should, either."

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Alexandrov had a brother who was a pilot in the Red Air Force, but he didn't tell us much about him, except that he was younger and a pilot of a fighter machine. He, too, had graduated through a secondary school, though his training had naturally been much briefer. When he left school at eighteen he had joined a factory aero club and shown such promise that he had been *invited* to enter a Red Air Force flying school.

"He was lucky to get asked," commented Alexandrov, "though he would probably have made good in whatever he did. He's a clever young fellow. He was studying experimental work in engineering. But, of course, as soon as he got a chance to take a commission he took it like lightning."

And that, of course, sums up an extremely important point not only about the Air Force, but about Soviet forces in general. Even in peacetime, the man in the Red Army, Air Force or Navy—men like Alexandrov or his brother, or the privates they commanded—were respected and admired by civilians more than any university professor or peace-at-any-price Bloomsbury intellectual. That peacetime difference between Russia and Britain is profound and important. For a long time in this country the dullard of the noble family has usually had the choice of the Church or the Army, and if he hasn't been too dull he has taken the Army and got a commission. And the loafer whose family got fed up with him joined the ranks.

Second-best men . . . what a tragedy! For Russia in 1939, and long before, only the really tip-top men stood a chance of gaining entry into a circle which was the envy of every civilian in the U.S.S.R.

Men like Alexandrov.

BREAKFAST AT EIGHT

Chapter 4

ON THE TRANS-SIBERIAN you get up at eight o'clock every morning. There is no need to, of course, for your time is always your own, but at about eight the train comes to life, the radio that is in every coach starts to blare, and there are the clumps of booted feet through the corridor. Every morning we made our own breakfasts—and ate them before washing, because there was only one closet to our coach, and at least fifty to seventy people to use it. We let the others have it. . . .

The problem of water was rather acute. Each closet had a tank above it which was filled at every station with water for washing. If there was a run on the facilities then the water soon gave out. The first time I was shaving it gave out half-way through, and I had to wait three hours before it was filled again and I could finish. And, too, I like to take my time shaving. The Russians didn't like me to take my time shaving. They banged on the door if I was too long; so eventually I gave it up, and had a good bath in Poland.

The days were all quite similar. Breakfast consisted of the tea we had hoarded from the last station the night before, plus black bread and plenty of butter with jam which we had bought in Manchukuo. Occasionally we had a tin of fruit, and often Kissling came in for a bite at half-past eight. Poor Kissling! He was very worried; they had put a Russian woman in his compartment; just the two of them sharing it, one bunk each.

"I can never mind," he said, "but her husband, he is in the next compartment and is bigger than me."

Extraordinary. There was the husband in the next compartment. And never a thought of asking Kissling to change.

For clothes, all the way through, we wore the same things,

giving some of them away towards the end of our journey. We both wore thick trousers, and I usually had a couple of shirts on (or handy) with a polo pullover to slip on underneath a heavy coat whenever we got to a station. We both wore slippers most of the time. It always was a funny feeling, coming in from a tramp on a snowy platform and putting our slippers on just as we should in our own home.

One of our big problems was the varying heat, as there was separate heating for each coach. At the end of each coach there was a cubicle for the guard, who had a stove leading to radiators throughout his particular coach. If he wanted to snatch an hour or two of sleep then he stoked up as much as possible, and the train would become a furnace. Some nights it was so hot that we would go to bed without a blanket on. Then in the middle of the night the guard would still be snoring on, the stove would die down, and the carriage would be freezingly cold. More than once, awakened by the intense cold, we both had to get up, get fully dressed, and have a cup of tea before going back to bed.

After breakfast our compartment had to be tidied up and made ready for the day. If there was no water for washing up the breakfast things—and usually there wasn't at that time of the morning—then they would have to wait, or perhaps Helen would give them a dry clean with an old towel we used for odd jobs. I can't say that this rough and ready method of cleansing made the next lot of tea taste any worse.

From the guard Helen borrowed a brush every morning to clean the compartment out—we had to do that ourselves. Then she made the beds and finally made up her face.

Very domestic, the whole routine.

Some time during the morning there would be a stop, maybe at a tiny wayside halt, maybe at a big town. In both cases we usually spent the time tramping up and down the platform with that resolution peculiar to the Briton in search of exercise. A never-failing draw was Two-hat Kissling. All through the trip he wore his two hats, one on top of the other, and he also wore the same set of plus-fours which had one faulty buckle. After ten minutes of up-and-down the platform

the buckle was sure to come undone, but he would never notice it and, blissfully ignorant of the reason for discreet chuckling, would march along with one plus-fours leg round his ankles.

There is no glamour in Siberia. There is interest, but there is a melancholy monotony about the never-changing scene. Every village was like the last, every town was like the last. The villages because they were usually the centre of a farming community who had nothing to do throughout the winter, the towns and cities because they were utility towns that had sprung up since the inception of the Five Year Plans east of the Urals.

Every station had a number of things common to each. A large picture of the head and shoulders of Stalin—at least ten times life-size—would be stuck up on the largest building, and over it, billowing in the wind, there would be the Red Flag. There was always hot water for our tea, and there was always radio. Sometimes we were lucky and got off the platform to have a quick look round the town or village; more often we just tramped up and down the platform until the handbell was rung for us to get into the train again. Then a quick dash, into our slippers, and out would come our chess set.

For chess was our passport to friendship. On the second day I was playing Kissling (and beating him), and I slid open the door because of the heat. Very soon a Soviet soldier was lolling against the support, watching. He was joined by another, by a third. And when Kissling retired to the modest comforts of his first-class compartment and his Russian woman, one of the Soviet soldiers asked, by gesture, if I would like to play him.

That was the beginning of our chess circle. Some of the men were far better than either Helen or myself, but others we could beat—Helen went up in their estimation enormously by beating one or two of the men, and that first game started a habit that lasted almost until we drew into the station at Moscow. Soldiers would tap on the door, poke a chess-board through it and raise their eyebrows; then we would get down, exchange cigarettes, perhaps open one of our precious bottles of beer, and have battles royal.

It was astonishing how sympathy between our two nations oozed through those small pieces on the black and white checked board as the train rumbled on. I could feel *something*—I don't quite know what—that linked us together. There was a simplicity about them that had some semblance to the finer points in the British character—the right British character, of course; I don't mean nincompoops like some of our politicians. A pity, I felt, that we couldn't increase that mutual respect.

So to lunch, which we usually ate in the restaurant-car, where we were served by a little fellow who was tremendously energetic and obviously highly amused by us throughout the entire trip. There were two women to help him, and a cashier at the end of the coach. The food did not vary much and was uniformly bad, though we got full quantitative value for our food coupons.

"You should the German be," declared Kissling. "You have the appetite, yes."

And the joke was that he was talking, not to me, but to Helen! We both always felt that, since this was the one hot meal of the day, it was up to us to make the best of it. Whatever was put before us, we asked for more. The little waiter, who had a rare sense of humour (there is much more humour in the Russians than people in Britain realize) used to watch us with eagle eyes, and as soon we were on the last mouthful, snatch away the plates—and bring them back, full again, without any requests from us.

Hansen sometimes used to sit at our table, but it was pathetic watching him try to get through a meal. I don't think I have ever seen a man so desperately ill and still on his feet. He ate nothing. He toyed with his plateful of borsch, took a spoonful or two, then pushed the plate away from him. Day after day.

I don't know whether it was his propaganda—he was always bitterly rubbing it in that he was only ill because we British had half-starved him in the last war—but I always felt a fatherly interest had to be taken in him. God knows I don't care much whether all the Germans in the world die of

malaria, but there—on the train—even though I despised the race just as much as I do now, I felt sorry for the man. His hands trembled as he smoked one cigarette after another, lighting the second with the butt of the first. He ate nothing, but he drank a lot—indeed, it was only after three or four vodkas that he began to sparkle. Then out would come the old arguments.

I always told him that I was going back to an England that would be at war within six months.

"Not unless you force it," he said sombrely, (He was right there!) "You started the last war, and you'll start this one. Barber—there comes a time in the life of a man or a state, when things become so big that you can't stand still. While Germany has no *Lebensraum* (etc., etc.) you're trying to get more land for your blasted Empire. This time Germany's going to stop you."

Once I saw him coming out of the lavatory. His face was as white as the passing snow, and he was shivering.

"Sometimes I get sick," he said as I helped him to his compartment and laid him down on his slab of wood.

"The sooner you get back to Germany the better!" I said.

Even then, out it came, parrot-fashion!

"You're right. Hitler has certainly put our medical services in order."

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Kissling was far more outspoken and imaginative. "This man Hitler, I am not interesting him," he said. "I like China better where every shirt you want you wear."

"And two hats," I said.

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It was on the second or third day, somewhere outside Chita, that I first spoke to the nuns. One of them looked so barren that I dared not open conversation, but the other elderly one had rather a charming face. Helen was worried because they were never present for any meals, so we went in with a peace-offering of some slab cake (and so that I could see the young nun again).

The Russian soldier who shared their cabin was fast asleep, snoring on one of the top berths, and the nuns were drinking tea—made in the same way as we made ours—and were eating some cold meat and black bread. They accepted Helen's cake with alacrity.

They were Swedish. The two old ones had been twenty years in China and were now returning for a six months break—for the first time. None of them could speak English, but as I have lived in Denmark and speak the language, we got along fairly well. The young one didn't blush any more. She kept her eyes averted, and accepted her piece of cake with a little bob of her head, but in silence.

I asked the nice old one if they were on holiday.

"No," she answered in precise, slightly formal tones—typical Swedish—"We don't bother much with holidays you know."

"And you?" I asked the younger one.

There was an awkward silence.

"Sister Rigmor is returning to Sweden," said the pleasant one after a pause, while the other one looked most unchristian daggers at me—not that I cared.

Late that night I was going through to Kissling's compartment to borrow something when I bumped into the nice old nun in the corridor.

"It was so nice of you to give us the cake," she said gently. "Your wife is a very charming and kind person."

Then she asked me an odd question, one that startled me.

"Have you been speaking to Sister Rigmor?" She pronounced it Reemaw, a lovely name.

She must have seen the astonished look on my face because, before I had time to answer, she said, "I'm so glad. We lost her for a few minutes this afternoon. I thought . . ." She had a beautiful smile.

She drew her black cloak more tightly around her. It was draughty in the corridor. "Sometimes, Mr Barber," she added softly, "even the best of us err a little. Gud Nat!"

Even Kissling's typical German details about his lady in Peking couldn't drive those few odd phrases out of my mind. Poor Sister Rigmor! She was obviously in disgrace.

As I clambered into bed and started to write my diary I said to Helen, "What a queer lot we are on this train."

There was Kissling for a start—a man who wore two hats. He was going back to Germany, yet through every inflexion in his voice you could tell he was looking forward to the time of his return to bask in the perfume of a Chinese flower instead of his rock-like German *Frau* with a bosom like a mountainside. There was Hansen—going home to die, as surely as the Trans-Siberian was going to be two days late at Moscow. (It was!) There was Alexandrov, the spirit of modern Soviet Russia—a man I just couldn't fathom. There was Sister Rigmor, the lady in disgrace.

"We must be very ordinary people," said Helen sleepily. "Switch off the light, dear!"

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On the wall of our compartment I stuck up a small sheet which the travel bureau in Shanghai had presented to us, showing the chief towns through which we were to pass—Chita, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Sverdlovsk and so on—these and fifty or so others. Each time we stopped I tried (sometimes in vain) to find out where we were, so that I could cross the name off the list.

Actually, of course, the Trans-Siberian, as you can see on a map, passes through the most fascinating belt of modern Soviet Russia—the part of the great continent where the Five Year Plans of the Soviet Government have been given more opportunity than anywhere else. We passed through great cities which fifteen years ago simply did not exist; and I am talking about cities of quarter of a million people. And it is on these cities, in this belt, that Soviet Russia to-day depends mainly for her armaments, for the very stuff of war.

Along the route of the Trans-Siberian there are six big industrial districts. They lie far apart from each other and some of the districts are bigger than the whole of England. They are like separate countries, linked together by the great double-track railway that spans a continent.

Near Vladivostok there is one great region producing coal,

iron, and similar raw materials: this, of course, we did not see. We came first to the Irkutsk region, near Lake Baikal. From there on to the Krasnoyarsk district, and so into the great Kuzbas basin, with probably the greatest factories in the world. Then we crossed a thousand miles of villages in the snow to reach the great Urals. Then the Volga, then Moscow. And remember—all but the Volga region are completely isolated from the enemy. Hitler can no more bomb the Kuzbas basin than Japan can bomb London, or American can bomb the South Pole.

More later about these regions—more details, anyway, as we come to them, for though I did not stay long, at least I got a brief glimpse. Of course, the most amazing thing about this Middle Belt of industrial Russia (and Siberia) is that in 1928 it just did not exist. At that time practically the entire Russian industrial system was grouped in three regions: the Ukraine, Leningrad, and Moscow. What, I wonder, would have happened had an enemy attacked then? If they had made as much headway as the Germans did in 1941 then Russia to-day would have been prostrate.

But in 1928 the great experiment started. The stonemasons, the builders, the engineers, the factory hands, the women, the men, the children—they all obeyed the order of the Soviet Government: "Go east, young man."

And from the wilderness, from the bare Steppe, there sprang up the most astonishing cities the world has ever known—because, of course, every city, every town, is a planned unit. They are not sprinkled haphazardly on the map. They follow the raw materials, the mines, the wealth, with the Trans-Siberian as the nerve of the modern state, and the grouping of the cities reveals more clearly than anything else the plans the Russians have put into operation.

In Siberia I saw time after time large smelting furnaces—but I rarely saw one unless the mine was close at hand. I saw great plants making steel—but never far away from an armaments works. And always, always near at hand, a ring of smaller factories, waiting eagerly to lap up the by-products and turn them to effective uses.

Naturally, it hasn't always worked out quite so idealistically. There have been many snags, and you can see cities that have not sprung up according to plan. But the general idea has been to plan a city according to the raw materials in the neighbourhood. Generally, that is what has been done—and the saving in transport has been enormous, which of course means saving in labour, fuel, power. And time.

Think what happened before the Five Year Plans were put into operation. Under the Tsarist regime the Ukraine mines provided most of the raw materials. When they were mined they had to be carried all the way up to Moscow or Leningrad where the factories were situated. And east of the Urals the peasants worked as they had worked for centuries, in spiritual and mental darkness. Less than a quarter of the great continent was opened up, and all the riches of the east lay under the earth's crust. But, my God! Men have worked since then.

Now the Trans-Siberian, along which we were travelling, links all these new industrial regions together, chains them loosely one to another, like a string of rich barges on a river.

I mention these general points now, because they may give you some idea of the regions through which we were travelling. Sometimes we would spend a day with nothing but one or two villages and a single town. Then the next day there would be almost no countryside, except factories—mile after mile after mile of industrial scenery, all (apparently, through the train windows), working to capacity. At the stations there would be gangs of men boarding the train. Experts in their particular jobs, they had been shifted to another locality. We had on the train a number of these mobile skilled labour squads, quite happily moving from one place to another, though you must remember that all these great experiments have not always had the approval of the population. Many have been made almost in defiance of the wishes of thousands.

But the results—well, they certainly justify the means now that there is a war on. Now (or rather, before the evacuation of factories from the fighting line) nearly half of the industrial capacity of the Soviet Union was well behind the Urals.

to be given a linguistic airing. Most of the Russians who spoke our language had voluntarily learned it in school or university, and the standard was very high—much better, for instance, than my French ever was. I asked one or two of them why they chose English—for England (and all it stands for) must have seemed a long way off to a student in, say, the Urals. But it was astonishing how many wanted and hoped some time to see either London or New York. And do you know, I had the feeling—quite wrong, maybe, but I mentioned it to Kissling, and he agreed with me—that these earnest young Communists were not so interested in seeing London or New York to study the political problems they said they wanted to study, but to grab for a short spell the dizzy delights of a pre-Communist era. They were the young, the ones who spoke English, and though not one put this into words, I felt that if they had done so they might have said, “I want to see London to have one hell of a good holiday!” Rather as we dash off from the drabness of a London winter with its shabby licensing hypocrisies to sample the delights of drinking all hours of the day at Monte Carlo. We are perfectly respectable, but it’s an exciting time.

And Communists, after all, are human, despite what Conservatives think.

The afternoons on the train were the longest part of the day, though, naturally, a great deal depended on the stations through which we passed—because if we passed through one of any size, then out I dashed with my teapot for an extra brewing, which meant tea at five o’clock as well as ‘dinner’ later. That extra social meal made a lot of difference, even though, after our huge lunch, we never ate anything. But the business of getting the cups, walking the length of seven or eight carriages with Kissling to collect his, all made for change.

For dinner we had ‘variations.’ One evening Helen and I were discussing what we should eat—there was not much variety in our portable larder—and she said suddenly, “I know! Let’s have a variation to-day.”

Almost every evening afterwards, at about eight o’clock,

Alexandrov would poke a solemn nose through the doorway, and without the flicker of a smile ask, "What's for eating to-night, Comrade Helen? Variations?"

I forget what the variation was. Oranges, I think, spread on biscuit, followed by shredded chocolate sandwich. It was really quite amusing, changing our diet of oranges, tinned fruit, apples, and biscuits to make different meals. If only we had had a primus! All the same, our best and most sustaining meal was fruit salad made of our fresh oranges and apples and a tin of fruit to give it lustre. Often in the restaurant car, instead of a pudding, there would be an orange or an apple. This we would greedily and unashamedly pocket against future hunger: these scraps came in very useful.

The process of settling down at night was a rather ragged one. Sleeping on a train is all very well, I have found, provided you have two things—a fair speed and few stops. Unfortunately, our train had rather a slow speed for much of its journey, and the stops in the night were frequent. They were more than frequent: they usually seemed to involve some backing by the entire train, and a great deal of clanking. But even that we got used to after a night or two.

There was no set time at night for the radio to be turned off—it depended on the carriage guard; and ours, apparently, enjoyed nothing more than three or four hours of mental proteins administered in a voice we could not understand, and without a single break in continuity. On the other hand, sometimes at night the real Russian music would be played—magnificent stuff, filling the entire coach—full-blooded, strong, vitriolic music. Hitler, as a Wagner fan, would have revelled in it. There was some very fine music at times—and not all of it by modern Soviet composers either. On two successive nights I heard complete versions of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and Tchaikovsky's lovely first Piano Concerto. But best of all I liked the Russian singing.

There I have a picture that will always be hard to forget. About eleven one night the radio voice ended, and after the usual minute's pause a bass voice started. A real Robeson of a voice—as rich and smooth as a garage hand pouring a quart

of oil into your car sump. It was very hot that night. We pulled back our door and looked through the corridor windows at the darkness outside—inky blackness, lights like pin-points in the distance, streaks of white on the ground, the occasional light of the train as the front carriages romped round a bend and we followed. Lovely. And gradually the men of the Red Army joined in the song. The radio singer must have chosen a selection of troops' songs, or tunes of the day. From all the compartments, from top bunk and lower bunk, from figures lolling in the corridor, voices joined in. It was one of the most magnificent sound effects I have ever heard, and though the men may not have been singing with the harmonic precision of the Don Cossacks, the scene made them sound infinitely better. In daylight it would have been just another sing-song. But in the train, with the wastes of Siberia skimming past in the darkness, it was superb. They sang well, those Russians. Their tunes were mournful and sad—their music always reminded me of a sheepdog. When they didn't know the lyrics, they quite happily sang without words—just tra-laa-laa'd their way along: you could still tell the tunes were mournful.

Yet the next morning Alexandrov said, "You heard the singing last night? The men are going home on leave—they sing well when they are happy!"

SNOW WARFARE

Chapter 5

A FEW MILES OUTSIDE CHITA our train stopped for two hours at a station which was little more than a wayside halt. There was one wooden building on the station, with a thin trail of blue smoke coming from a wood fire. Behind the platform were a dozen or so other buildings—long, low, all built of wood. Otherwise, just snow and bent trees. To the south the flat snow desert faded away into infinity. It was like a white sea with a rim on the horizon, and I could not see a single dwelling on the lonely scene. To the north, however, the ground rose fairly steeply, at first dotted with occasional black fir-trees, later fairly heavily wooded. I forget the name of the place—it was, I suppose, what the Soviets call in their communiqués an “inhabited place”; it certainly could never merit the name of village, nor even hamlet.

“Those long huts,” said Alexandrov, “they are barracks. Ever seen ski troops before?”

I shook my head.

“Look then!” he pointed up the hill.

I looked, following his pointed finger through the carriage window, and at first could see nothing. Suddenly a flash of white passed against the black skeleton of a tree; flashed and was gone. Ski soldier. Out of the snow, as they came whirling down the hillside, more and more appeared. They kept to no regular formation. They came shooting down, streaking down the hillside, converging from all directions towards the little group of low huts.

“Manœuvres,” said Alexandrov briefly. He never wasted words. “Let’s go.” He put on his woollen helmet with its Red Star on the front, and I wrapped myself up. Helen we left behind with Kissling to keep her company. Alexandrov

really had no time for women—even though he *was* getting married.

The nearest hut was about two or three hundred yards away, and it was quite easy to walk over the packed snow. As we reached the door the ski troops were curling down, swerving suddenly, twisting sharply from speed to a full stop. As they crowded through the door after unbuckling their skis those who could not get through stamped and clumped and banged their hands on their chests. Their breath was the same as ever—clouds of ‘steam’ in the bitter cold air—it seemed much colder than in Manchukuo or at Otpor, though that, perhaps, was because I was standing still. But not for long. Alexandrov pushed a way through the door, and I squeezed dutifully after him.

Inside, with an incredible babel, everybody was talking and laughing, and in some hidden corner a radio was going full blast. Nobody ever thought of turning it off. The ski troops were taking off their clothes. Each one wore over everything else a white cloak with a monk’s cowl that reached even over his helmet. It was rather like a sheet—like a Ku Klux Klan garb; underneath the clothes were field grey. Each one carried a rifle, slung round his neck so that it hung in front instead of across his back. Two or three of them had map cases, large flat cloth satchels into which in war-time they could doubtless stuff a bomb or two as well.

Their boots were heavy—they had to be for the ski-ing—but they came up to the knees, and were made of felt. I noticed that particularly and asked Alexandrov if leather was scarce in Soviet Russia.

“Leather no good,” he answered. “It won’t keep out the cold. Leather boots are very bad. You must have warm *loose* clothing. Nothing must fit tight.”

Some of the soldiers wore plain, reversed sheepskins—they were a bright yellow, with the undyed wool on the inside, turned out at the top to form a woollen collar; but many of them—indeed, most of them—wore a jacket of material rather like a quilt. I tried one on, and they were astonishingly light. They were stuffed and quilted with cross-criss sewing about every four inches.

"All underclothes are wool," said Alexandrov, "otherwise they freeze." Their gloves were wool, and many of their hats were wool, worn underneath with red stars on the front, and the white sheeting. The men wore three or four pairs of stockings each and heavy mufflers. The baggy trousers were—or seemed to my touch to be—of real wool.

The wooden hut, which held about fifty men, was very warm inside. It had double doors, double windows, double walls: quite draught-proof. As soon as the men took off their cloaks they went to the far end, where there were containers of hot borsch. Though I could not understand them, Alexandrov and I sat down in the middle and managed to get a plateful each—far better borsch, incidentally, than on the train.

Clothes and warmth are certainly important weapons in snow warfare. In fact, I would class clothes as a major weapon, and the Russians know this—indeed their approach to the art of winter warfare is entirely different from the German approach. The Germans in this first winter in Russia were still thinking in terms of winter sports in the Austrial Tyrol; but the difference between a European winter and a Russian winter is enormous. The plans of the Russians in winter fighting go far deeper than the German methods, for the Red Army bases its method of fighting on a style of living.

For centuries the Russians of all classes and creeds have had to battle with the elements: battling with Germans has not been half so fierce as battling with frost-bite.

Talking of frost-bite . . . after lunch, standing outside the hut with Alexandrov, banging our arms against our chests to keep warm, we saw a lone skier come sailing down the hill-side, threading his way through the dark trees. A Soviet soldier was standing by our side, and the skier, as he drew up, half stumbled. His face was white, his steps were faltering, and as we stood there the most extraordinary thing happened.

The Red soldier standing next to us suddenly bent down, picked up a handful of snow and without a word dashed it in the skier's face, rubbing vigorously.

"Frost-bite," said Alexandrov laconically.

The skier stood mute as the Red soldier, half-supporting him, rubbed the snow all over his face. I saw the same thing happen once more while I was in Russia, that time in a street of Krasnoyarsk.

"The trouble with frost-bite," explained Alexandrov, "is that you don't always know when you've got it. Your nose goes so dead that you can't feel anything. And if you try to thaw it out in front of a fire you're done." He poked his nose through the door and shouted.

In answer to the Russian request a soldier came out and pulled off his glove. Three of his fingers were missing. They were just stumps. The ends looked smooth, and something rather like a nail seemed to be growing on each one. The Russian grinned as he saw my obvious interest.

"He held them in front of a fire to get them warm," said Alexandrov. "They dropped off—they always do if you thaw a frost-bite too quickly."

Both the soldiers seemed to think it a huge joke.

Soviet ski troops undergo the most rigorous training, even after they have become qualified soldiers. The men in these barracks had all been ski-ing from boyhood days. They were men from the Siberian steppes, and they were finishing a six weeks' course of advanced army ski-ing. They started their training by doing long hours on level ground "just to sort out the weak ones." They also had to learn to run without sticks, after which they spent days negotiating difficult obstacles—slopes, trees, and so on—with a full pack and without sticks. These men had just got back from two-day manoeuvres during which they had been firing their rifles and tommy-guns on skis while moving at full speed, and—also at full speed—practising hand-grenade throwing.

Alexandrov asked the skier a question in Russian, then turned to me. "In two days they have done seventy miles," he announced. "Sometimes they are away for weeks, our practised men. They can travel well over a thousand miles a month."

As part of his equipment, each skier had a haversack of iron

rations—black bread, hard meat, “and vodka if they buy it themselves.” Alexandrov would not, of course, tell me anything about the size of Russia’s ski army—probably he did not know, and anyway, the figure must have changed considerably since 1939.

“But we have an armoured ski division,” he said. “We have a whole division which has armoured sledges driven by propellers—they have small aeroplane engines on them—and light tanks on skis too.” When he told me that in 1939 I confess I did not believe him. I put it down to exuberant Soviet propaganda. Now, Alexandrov, I apologize.

I did, by the way, see at a station once a military armoured car on skis, with two machine-guns in the front and room inside for at least four or five soldiers. It was standing still, but it *looked* as though sixty miles an hour would be a very simple affair. . . .

The Russians, as I said, are particularly adept at making the best use of the conditions. Between all the barrack huts they had flattened down quite presentable snow roads—we had walked along one from the station—and as it was snowing fairly frequently, this was a job that had to be kept going. They had a lorry with specially wide caterpillar tracks at the rear, so that it could always gain a grip. Tied to the back were half a dozen thick, heavy tree-trunks—firs, I suppose, cut down from the neighbouring wood. By going over all the tracks every day the snow was kept flattened and beaten down hard so that men could walk along it, or horses tread it with comparative ease. I watched the lorry slowly heaving the tree-trunks along past us.

“You don’t think it’s necessary?” asked Alexandrov sardonically. “Follow me. We will take a walk to that tree.” And he pointed to one a hundred yards or so away. As we came to the edge of the track he ushered me forward politely. “Please! You go first.”

I did. And the first step I took off the beaten track I sank to my knees in snow. It was the only time I ever saw Alexandrov nearly laugh. I’ll swear the corners of his mouth twitched for a split second.

"You see? Very necessary," he said.

All the ski troops—and for that matter all the Red soldiers—were having particular attention paid in their training to the destruction of tanks. "Of course," said Alexandrov, "planes are the best way to beat tanks." But I think that he would probably agree now that he was wrong. The Russians have tried out planes against tanks in this war, but the speed of modern fighters makes aiming an extremely haphazard affair. The troops I visited had been receiving a special course in anti-tank fighting when on skis or even on foot. And the first lesson they were taught was—to wait. The whole secret of tank busting, which they were being taught, was to wait until the last minute. They have discovered that, by letting tanks get within a few yards, they can often put them right out of action by using a fire bottle—a bottle filled with petrol or some similar inflammable liquid. But they must wait—wait until the very last second. Otherwise the distance is too far, and the fire bottle is not powerful enough. Hand-grenades are, of course, also used, but the Russians love the bottle. I tried to explain that to Alexandrov, but he couldn't understand the joke.

It is astonishing, the part the ski plays in Russia's armed forces. Aeroplanes, of course, are fitted with skis too. In a grey dusk somewhere near Lake Baikal I saw five or six black bombers lined up in a field. I don't know whether they had skis or not, but under each fuselage there was a bright red glare. A fire. Mechanics had lit one under each plane to keep the oil and engines warm throughout the night. I was told that they would have, even so, to start the engine every two hours to stop it freezing up. They start it, let it run for a few moments to get the oil moving, then switch it off for another two hours.

The same with tank engines and armoured cars. When the thermometer is forty degrees below zero you can take no chances.

With bodies as well as machines. "Come on!" I said to Alexandrov, "I'm cold, and I'm going back to the train."

"You never saw ski troops like that in Manchukuo," said Alexandrov when we went inside the huts again. "Round the top border of Manchukuo the Japanese will never stand a chance."

I raised my eyebrows. "*Will* not?"

"We shall fight them. Every Russian who has ever been born hates the Japanese. We shall fight them in the winter, and we shall thrash their little yellow bodies until they squeal. Rats, that's what they are. They'd never stand a chance against Soviet Russia. Otherwise, why haven't they attacked us? They've been wanting to for years. I wish they'd attack us now. I'm tired of doing nothing. That's what's the trouble with this world. There's a war coming, but we shan't be in it."

I pointed out (diffidently) that I did not like war.

"Oh, you English," he answered, quite without malice. "You are different. We want it. We've had war in our own country, and the right people—the Soviets—won it. Now's the time for us to crush our enemies. They're all around us." He took out one of his vile Russian cigarettes, half cigarette, half cardboard tube.

His words might almost have been spoken by Hitler! Talk about encirclement!

"You don't think you'll be fighting us?" I asked with a smile.

"You? The English?" He struck a match. "You are too far away."

I suspect that Alexandrov's humour was drier than 1929 champagne.

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All the same, I wrote in the copious diary that I kept throughout the trip—a diary in which I recorded conversations as well as impressions—that Soviet ski troops were brilliant and could never be beaten. I got an awful shock when they went into action against the Fins. I am a bit happier about my prediction now.

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At one of the far huts, longer than the others, Alexandrov had pushed open a door. Out came the smell of horses. There were row upon row of small, shaggy horses—tough little brutes—in stalls made only by rough partitions against the wall of the hut.

"Cavalry horses," said Alexandrov. "They train here in the winter, too."

Two Red Army soldiers were grooming them—brushing their willing bodies down, singing as they pushed the brushes up and down with rhythmic strokes.

"Every horse in the Red Army learns winter warfare like its master," said Alexandrov, stamping on his cigarette end. "I would rather meet a tank than a cavalryman with his sabre drawn. Though actually, of course, the sabre is going. We've got machine-guns now—small ones, they fire a few rounds."

He took me back into the big hut of the men, and searched around for one who was standing in a corner examining some saddles. To me Alexandrov said in an aside, "This is the instructor." He spoke to him and then added, "But he can't speak English."

After more talk he turned to me again and said, "These cavalry men have just been on manoeuvres. An hour earlier and we should have seen them returning. That is a picture you would never forget. Neither man nor horse is spared."

The men had been on a three-day mock battle, attempting to capture some hamlet in the vicinity. They rode fifty miles on the first day towards the 'enemy' lines, and when they found a weak spot attacked on foot, leaving their horses tethered behind. For each cavalryman was also a trained infantryman. He carried a sub-machine-gun and, among other things, a pair of pincers to cut his way through barbed wire. They forced their way through barbed wire, then the horses were brought up, and then the men were off again. Four cases were left behind with frost-bite, said the instructor. The Soviets believe in thorough training.

The instructor said that for the three days in the perishing cold they had only eaten iron rations—special food they

carried in their haversacks. They had had no fires, but had made dug-outs in the snow.

"You can cut dug-outs in the snow here," said Alexandrov, "though you can't do it further west. Here the ground is firm. Farther towards Europe there's still a crust of mud from the autumn rains even if you do get underneath the ice and snow."

The Soviet cavalryman, I was told, has two secrets—one is silence, the other—the other is the ability to forget that he has a horse. The second point interested me very much—that Soviet cavalrymen regard their horses merely as useful mounts to get them to the battlefield, when they frequently dismount and fight as ordinary infantrymen or machine-gunners. Though at times the cavalry still charge, that is, on the whole, an out-of-date technique. Nowadays the horse is the means to the end—and I was interested because the same technique is used by the American cavalry. They even have big lorries to carry their horses.

In the winter snow of a Siberian night the horse is noiseless. Safely, silently, it can bring the soldier behind the enemy lines, and thus cavalry can be turned into one of the most effective guerrilla units. The Soviets, of course, now pay a great deal of attention to small penetrations of the enemy lines—penetrations that could well be carried out with half a dozen horsemen. Once behind the lines, the cavalryman establishes a radio transmitter and can do no end of mischief.

At night the cavalrymen often beat the tank. I was told that far more attention is paid to night training than to daylight training—simply so that cavalrymen can be trained for their most important job: quick penetration of enemy lines, possible mopping up or, at any rate, disorganization. There are no frozen engines on horses! The men carry grenades, some carry machine-guns.

"They are the men," said Alexandrov, "who never fight in the front line. Always through it."

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All the men at this post were conscripts—youths who had

been called up for a two-year spell on or about their nineteenth birthday. While in the forces their only pay was a little pocket-money, and the few who had children received allowances, but their wives got none. If a boy's old mother or father depended on his work then they could receive a grant.

One man told me—I forget where it was—that the secret of any success the Red Army would ever gain in warfare depended entirely on the collective farms of the Soviet Union.

"Millions of men," he said, "have learned the art of using tractors on rough ground—tractors with caterpillar wheels. Once you can do that, it isn't difficult to drive a tank."

There is probably a lot in it. The average Red soldier, I thought, was very mechanically minded though he is still fond of using his two-foot-long bayonet.

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I could have spent two days at that wayside halt instead of two hours. But we had to go. I nodded to the Red soldiers until one, realizing that I was English, held out his hand with a sheepish grin. As I shook it they were all around me, thrusting hands forward.

Come to think of it, it must be an odd feeling, shaking hands for the first time.

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Yes, I liked that spell at the foot of the low, rolling hills outside Chita. The halt had this advantage—it was not quite so *standardized* as the places we were to come to later. It was a little collection of individual huts.

There was none of the 'routine' of a Russian town—no bust of Stalin and Lenin like the ones we saw at nearly every station, no recreation park—sometimes rather dilapidated. No beggars and (doubtless because it was a military establishment) none of the shoddiness you saw in the towns. The men of the ski troops were smart and slick at their job.

Though they talked and chattered like magpies in their barracks, I felt they would be grim, silent, efficient, when they were out at work—in marked contrast to the civilian workers

we saw later, working perhaps on stations, on roads, or on the train. Time did not matter to them; they ploughed their way cheerfully, slowly (and loudly) through any job they had to do with that inconsequential attitude to life which is at once the delight and despair of the casual visitor to the U.S.S.R.

RESULTS OF A PLAN

Chapter 6

YOU CAN SKIP THIS CHAPTER if you wish.

It does not apply to any particular portion of our journey across Asia, yet, in its way it applies to the lot. My hobby in life is the presentation of orderly columns of figures, and I feel it is no use telling you of the appearance of factories on the Trans-Siberian, unless I make some attempt to see where Russia's raw materials are located. It is, indeed, a factor most vital to the future not only of the war, but of the world—the placing, the location of factory and workshop, of steel-mill and coal-mine, of aircraft works, of munition plant.

The present war is, of course, affected first, because the percentage of industry out of range of Goering's bombers will have a determining effect upon the length of the war; but it will also have an important effect on the part Russia plays in the peace that follows, for if there is one thing that is certain it is that Communism will never be the same after this war has been won, and Germany and Italy and Japan have been beaten. If we do not expect democracy to be the same, why should we expect Communism to remain the same? War cleanses many evils: it has that small fact in its gory favour; and it also smashes down many barriers of isolationism.

There was one old Russian we met on the train. He was an old-stager; Tsarist, White, Red, changing according to the times, very wise, with a pair of kindly eyes and a great bushy grey beard.

"I've been through it all," he said when he knew us well, "and the big trouble with Communism is—no tolerance. Man can't survive without tolerance—it's the balm we all need for the wrong things we all do. I'm all in favour of Communism—this country is fifty times better than it ever was under the Romanoffs, even though it might have lost a

little of its"—he hesitated for the right word, stroking his beard for inspiration—"a little of its elegance. But Communism is based on the perfect human element. And there's no such thing. That is why, in Communism as it is at present, there must be fear as well. Because every man has his own little secrets which he wants no policeman to discover. You must have tolerance.

"When I was fourteen, I remember so well, my father ran off with a barmaid from Odessa. I saw her once; she was like a peacock. She was dressed in something black that rustled. I always remember her serving father behind the bar.

"Mother never forgave Father. Never. In three months he came back, apologetic, chastened. The peacock's feathers had all fallen out—or should it be the lady peacock? Father came back, though—but would my mother have him? No. Never. She preferred to be miserable for the rest of her life. Poor Mother. She would have made a good Communist. . . .

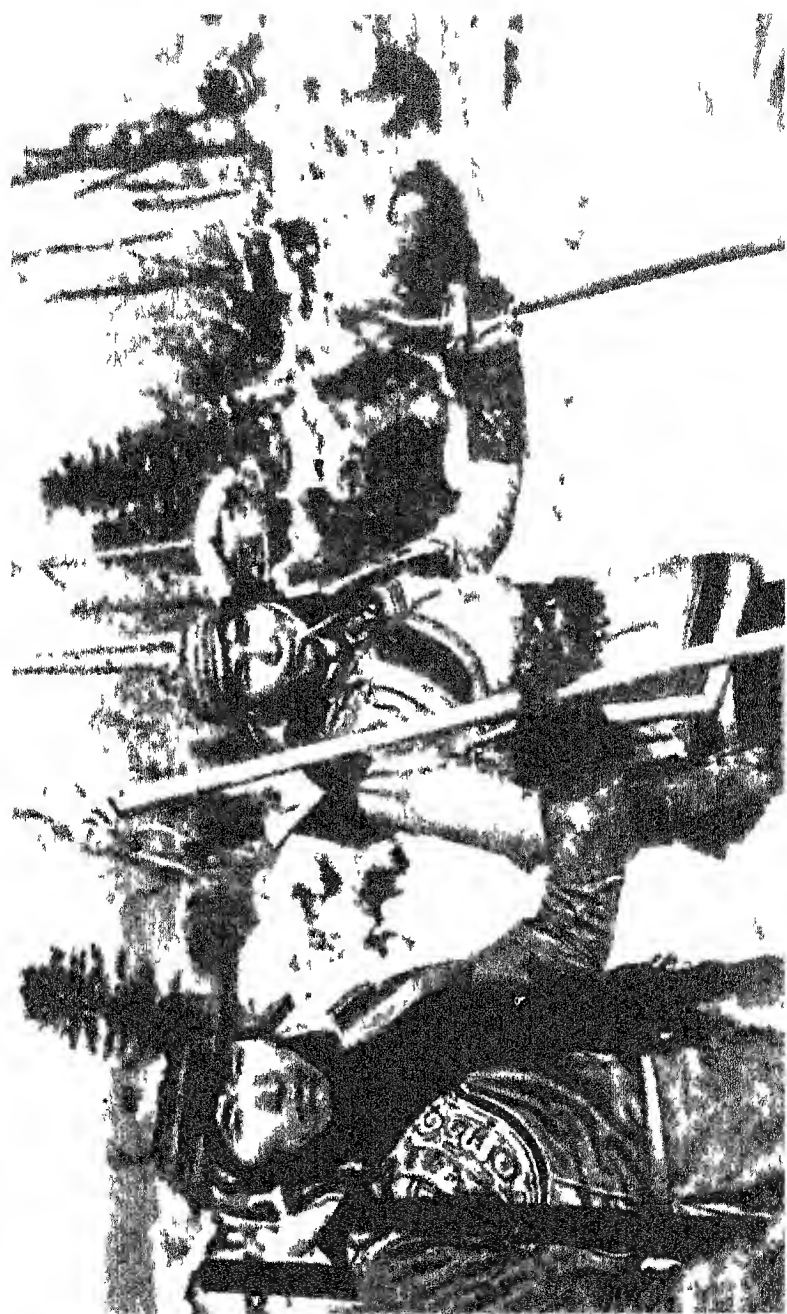
"You mark my word, if this new Russia ever goes to war it will do her the world of good. It will clean her out, scrape her insides, and she'll emerge greater than she's ever been before in her history. Because you know, Mr Barber, Soviet Russia is a very big place. It is very possible that one day it will be the first country of the world, not only in its own estimation, but in everybody's—and not through military conquests. Through tolerance."

I wonder. He was a very wise old man. His fingers, I remember, were very white, and his nails very clean—a rare sight in workaday Russia, where the emphasis is rather on cleaning a whole body once a week than on an eighth of an inch at one's finger-tips every evening. I do think that after this war Russia's part in international affairs must be a major one. Indeed, she has already probably insisted on it, and Britain and America have been in no position to say no. And a great deal of her strength will depend not only on her manpower, but on her resources, the very resources which Helen and I were passing on the way to Moscow—food for the world, coal for the world, iron-ore and manganese for the world.

SKI SOLDIER

This is one of their exercises.





The tolerance will come. Even now Stalin can smile benignly at the peculiar foibles of our civilization, realizing no doubt that, however curious, we can't be such bad fellows after all, because we have delivered quite a lot of the goods.

But first the war has to be won. And because the supply lines either from Britain or the United States are long, arduous, and dangerous, Russia must use as many of her own raw materials as possible. Where are these situated? What percentage of her factories behind the Urals use these raw materials?

As I am on my hobby-horse for a dozen or so pages, let us go into this question thoroughly—for I have found no single book in which these facts are explained simply and easily.

Broadly speaking, I should say that just less than half of Russia's industrial capacity was situated behind the Urals in 1939. That is the first big point. There has been a lot of easy talk, many glib assurances, that with the transport of industry to the east—with the evacuation of the factories—Soviet Russia's entire industrial output has been saved. Far from it. By far the greatest industrial area of Russia is the Moscow region, with Moscow as the centre, with its four million inhabitants, and the great city of Tula, farther south, backing it up in the speedy production of modern armaments. Moscow is studded with aeroplane plants, munitions factories, gigantic Soviet arsenals. And just as important is the Ukraine. From the Ukraine, in the year we passed through Russia, the Soviets still got three-fifths of all their pig-iron, the same fraction of all their iron ore, the same fraction of all their coal, and nearly half of their rolled metal. The great cities in that region have been growing almost as much and almost as quickly as the planned utility cities in the centre of Asia—Kharkov, Rostov, Mariupol, and so on.

The fact that Germany has gained some of these cities has bled Russia badly. The industrial gains to Germany are not of paramount importance, for Germany's shortages are

European shortages, which cannot be repaired in European Russia. But the loss to Soviet Russia is grave.

YES—SOVIETS!

Siberia has many races. These are hunters from the Far North.

And farther south, in the Crimea—in the bloody battlefield of the Kerch peninsula—were European Russia's great iron ore fields with an almost untold reserve. Admittedly there are greater reserves behind the Urals—but a factory that was working to full capacity in the Crimea is worth two to-morrow in Sverdlovsk.

As you advance farther south, farther east, into the storehouse of riches, the world of oil tumbles about your eyes. Two-thirds of Soviet Russia's oil—probably more—comes from the goat-milk valleys and the jagged peaks of the Caucasus.

Maybe the Germans will never get all these riches—I am certainly not going to prophesy the course of any war, I have made too many mistakes—but the point is that all these riches are *west of the Urals*.

That is the broad picture. Now let us go into more detail by analysing the location of some of the main raw materials. For a start, Soviet Russia is first in the world output of flax, hemp, barley, oats, rye, sugar-beet, wheat, manganese, and iron ore (bracketed with U.S.A.); second in petroleum, phosphates, and linseed—all vital to war; third in chrome ore, gold, nickel, cotton, tobacco. It is practically self-sufficient on a peace-time basis in zinc and aluminium, and though no rubber is grown, synthetic rubber has been produced on an increasing scale—it is rather important to note that since 1934 imports of rubber have hardly increased: and as Russia must have been needing more and more, it would appear that her synthetic rubber has fully met her needs.

Now, without bothering with totals, let us see the location of each important raw material. First coal. Sixty per cent. of Russia's coal (I am talking all the way through this chapter of figures before the German invasion) was produced in the Ukraine. Another 6 per cent. came from the Moscow area. Which leaves just a third of her production east of the Urals.

As far as oil is concerned, only 6 per cent. was produced behind the Urals, three-quarters of the supplies coming, of course, from the Baku region. It is well known, however, that oil production east of the Urals has been leaping up, and

I have been told on very good authority that Russia expected in 1942 to produce 25 per cent. of her oil behind the Urals. There must be a lot in Siberia, though when it could be ready I don't know. If Germany took the Caucasus Russia would be desperately short of oil.

Two-thirds of the iron ore comes from the Ukraine, the other third being in the 'safety belt'—most of it comes from Magnitogorsk, and there are some very important deposits in Eastern Siberia as well. Pretty well all the manganese came from the Caucasus and the Ukraine.

But there are other metals which are much farther from Germany. Most of Russia's nickel comes from the Urals, so does most of her chrome, and so does the tungsten group—the alloy metals which are so necessary to toughen steel for war purposes. Wolfram-molybdenum deposits are being exploited in Kazakhstan, while there are great wolfram deposits on the borders of Mongolia, where a combine has been formed to work them. There are also molybdenum deposits in this area, and a works has been opened on the spot. Four-fifths of the copper comes from the Urals.

These are some of the most important basic minerals of modern warfare. There are others, of course, as well—such as aluminium, which I imagine Russia still needs from us; tin, which is not used on a very large scale except in subsidiary war industries (packing food for troops and so on).

I have put the worst side first. Against it you must lay a number of things. Firstly, food is a munition of war, and the collective farms of Siberia can keep Russia in iron rations until Hitler has long been dead and buried. That is important. It gives Russia a great advantage over the people of Britain, perpetually faced with the threat of starvation.

Then again, you never quite know all that is going on in Russia. The cities on the middle belt—the heavy industrial belt of the Trans-Siberian—have all grown astonishingly in the three years 1936-39. Some of them, like Stalinsk, have more than trebled: a phenomenal increase in population. What is happening in those cities between 1941 and 1943? With a resolute population, anything . . . anything for victory. None

of us know yet the full great story of the factories that moved east, of the hundreds of thousands of skilled workers who left their factories in Moscow, in Kiev, in Kharkov, for pastures new behind the great fortification of the Urals. One thing is certain. This was no hodge-podge evacuation, done in a hurry, under duress. It was planned years before. Factories—great empty shells—were waiting for the machinery. Everything was planned down to the last rivet, and on the whole the evacuation experiment was a remarkable success.

Lastly you must remember this. That very lack of tolerance which our wise old Russian friend said would vanish with the roar of war has been the guiding light through their struggle. No tolerance, no second chances. Beat not only the enemy, but the weaknesses within. And if I could meet the old Russian now, he would agree, I think, that this bitter hardness has stood the Soviets in good stead. The tolerance will automatically come afterwards. But now, angry and determined, Russia will tolerate no failure. They don't put autocratic parliamentary failures into the House of Lords, or bestow on aged generals the title of some English town and make him Comrade Lord of Stow-in-the-Wold.

I believe it is very important, when assessing, however broadly, Soviet Russia's capacity to produce arms, not to overestimate that capacity. But at the same time that does not mean that one should be gloomy. Broadly speaking, there should be nearly half of Russia's normal production capacity behind the Urals, and perhaps you can add a little to that, because many peacetime enterprises in Siberia will now be shifted over to the making of the weapons of death. When I mentioned to somebody—very tactfully!—that the stress of industry on the Trans-Siberian railway seemed predominantly warlike he was positively astonished.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "That just shows you how you English get the wrong impressions. Of course to you people who've forgotten how to make shells—and are very worried about it!—any chimney with a lot of smoke means the fire of war. Good gracious!—all along this railway, you've got the greatest industries for peace the world has ever

known. Here, we're turning out in their *thousands* tractors for the land. You can still have your horses—they're very picturesque, I know. We'll be satisfied with bread at half the price of yours."

He was absolutely amazed at my ignorance!

"Why, in this very place," my diary recorded the meeting as having taken place near Taiga, which is about half-way between Krasnoyarsk and Babarinsk, "we're building bricks so cheaply that a man can build his house for next to nothing. He has his electric light laid on automatically, while as for your great friends in America—well, eighty farms out of every hundred haven't got electricity" (which is quite true, still). "Yet look what we've had to beat." He waved his arm to take in the whole desolate station, cold, miserable, uninspiring. He shook his head mournfully. "No Mr Englishman," he said, "Russia will never start a war—but if there is one she will always finish it. Nobody can conquer us—they can try, but they can never do it. The Japanese think they can, and they'll try, but they'll never succeed. Look at the size of Russia on the map. It is a physical impossibility.

"You and your preparations for war! Only the nasty little nations—the nations that are retarding progress—go to war. When a nation is going back—like Germany has gone back to the Middle Ages—then she may surely start a war. But when a nation is going forward—as Russia is going forward—never."

I retired abashed. He was a very eloquent young man. It was only after he had gone that I realized what I had wanted to put into words—that whatever the industries of the Middle Belt were doing at that moment, they *could* at a hand's turn be switched over to war production. Tractors into tanks.

As for the growing of food behind the Ural mountains, well, the collective farmers—men and women—will not fail in their job. The soil is such that crops can be grown with the minimum of fertilizers, and the Soviets have unquestionably produced gigantic numbers of tractors and ploughs so

that now, when factories have changed to war production, there should be enough for the immense expansion that must necessarily take place owing to the enemy occupation of the Ukraine, with its mile after mile of rich black soil under the enemy boot.

Of course, going through in winter I could never quite realize the immense fertility of the barren country we saw. The great snow plains, the slender but dour fir-trees, the wracks of grey cloud, the peasants sleeping on the floor of a station waiting-room—a bundle of rags and blankets with a trickle of visible air the only sign of life—it seemed impossible that wheat and barley and rye should flourish on that same soil; that sugar-beet should sprout, that lambs should play at their mothers' udders. But then, when you are in the cold for some time you are apt to forget the things the sun can do. The season of fertility is short in Siberia—very short. The ice on the great rivers cracks and groans and splits with gigantic roars, the spring thaws come, followed by the sun and the growing months—then the collective farmers get to work. The crops are sown in May—late in May, sometimes early in June. They are ready to be harvested in the first two weeks of August. The summer even beats ours for shortness!

There is wheat for the whole of Russia thousands of miles from the nearest incendiary bomb—Japanese or German. There are cattle, there is butter, there are eggs. Only the hens am I doubtful about! They swore they were hens when we had them for lunch in the restaurant-car, but never have I seen bones so big or legs so long. Still, I dare say I have eaten many a rabbit under a fancy French name in a London hotel if it comes to that. . . .

The Urals are the richest and most important of all the hinterland industrial centres of the Soviet Union, and as I had some slight opportunity to see a little of Sverdlovsk, the Sheffield of Russia, the steel heart of the Soviet armies, I won't talk about the Urals now, but later, in their proper place, as our train reached them.

But there is one other district which makes up a great percentage of Russia's safe industry. We passed along the central belt, and we missed this one great industrial region in the south—the Central Asian region, where the drive for industry has been as startling as anywhere else. Only twenty years ago the nomads put up their tents in the huge hollow made up by the borders of Afghanistan and Sinkiang as it stretched north towards Outer Mongolia. The towns were small and fly-blown despite their exciting names—towns like Samarkand where carpet-sellers and mosques were the chief features of the landscape, and where the only industries were the tending of cattle and sheep and the growing of crops. The mosques are still there, but they are unimportant and insignificant next to the big blocks of workers' flats that have grown up, next to the gigantic factories and workshops, to the power plants and the turbine-alternators. Samarkand has its share of industries now, and the plains that used to be leisurely tended are now energetically devoted to the growing of cotton and industrial crops, while most of the food is grown in collective farms farther north.

One of the great cities of this Central Asian region is Chimkent, with a population of seventy-five thousand and a lead-zinc combine that produces two-thirds of the entire Soviet output. Ubinsk produces wolfram, while in the centre are two great towns devoted to the packing of meat—doubtless going, now, to the Soviet soldiers and airmen. Textiles, pottery, leather, hides—all of these are manufactured there. Nearly all Russia's cotton and silk comes from this region. Copper, zinc, coal, all come from it too, and on the outskirts is the new town of Karaganda. Here is a classic example of Soviet planning. Fifteen years ago Karaganda simply did not exist. It just didn't. There was no such place. Now the population is nearly a quarter of a million. In 1930 Karaganda produced ninety thousand tons of coal—the best coking coal in the whole of Soviet Russia and Siberia. By the time we were passing through Russia the output had risen to seven million tons a year.

Karaganda and the Central Asian district are in the very

heart of Russia—literally. A Soviet school-teacher on the train drew for me on a map the rough location of the Central Asian, the Ural, and the Kuzbas districts. When he had done it he said, "Draw a line linking all three districts together, with a dip on the top line as you follow the Trans-Siberian railway, and you have the perfect heart of Russia."

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Hansen, the pro-Hitlerite German, and I were talking one evening about Russian industries east of the Urals, and I was saying how impressive the statistics were. Hansen agreed. I have found most Germans very different from the British in one very significant point—when talking war they are very quick to appraise the values of potential enemies, very slow to pooh-pooh anything.

Hansen was just as sure as I was that the war potential of Asiatic Russia was very striking. After all, you had only to compare a day's journey in the Trans-Siberian through an industrial area with a day's trip through the Barmen region of Germany or the Birmingham district of England. You seemed to take much longer to reach the open country in Russia.

"But of course," said Hansen, "I'm certain they can never transport the stuff even if they can manufacture it. In our country we've got good railways and small distances—and those two things together are unbeatatable. Here you've got just the reverse—bad railways and long distances."

Transport may be a problem, but once again Russia goes into things so whole-heartedly. If there are not sufficient trains to carry guns from Sverdlovsk to the battle front then what will happen? Simple; no single solitary civilian will ever be seen on that railway until those guns are delivered. And, that way, the guns *will* be delivered. You can bet your life on that.

Of course, it all boils down to one thing. No tolerance. . . .

Actually, what is Russia's transport position? Though it is slow, I don't think it has half so many weaknesses as some people imagine. In order to comprehend the difficulties, you have to realize the extent of the area concerned. Russia and

Siberia together cover an area of 8,318,094 square miles—about a sixth of the total land surface of the globe. Only the British Empire is bigger than Russia and its autonomous states—and think of the railways and the shipping routes that we have so zealously to guard to keep open the lines of our communications.

Added to this great size, you have the ever-changing problem of industrial development. Transport facilities have to be provided as new towns spring up in a matter of months. Before those towns can be made complete and (as near as possible) self-supporting Soviets, long hauls of raw materials have to be made. When you start a new town you have to carry first the tools to put up houses, to build roads, to lay down the foundations of factory, mine, and workshop. Power must be laid on, water harnessed. And all, in Russia, by rail or river—mostly rail, for more than any other great Power Russia is dependent on her railways.

Since 1913 the railways have increased from about thirty-six thousand miles of track to fifty-six thousand, the most important improvement, of course, being the laying of a complete second track on the Trans-Siberian. The Moscow-Donbass line is another example of a route with much-increased efficiency, but I felt all the way through Russia that the accent was not so much on new tracks, but on increasing carrying capacity on present tracks. Traffic must have increased at a far greater ratio than the increase in the track laid down—much greater. In 1913 Russia was an agrarian nation. Now she is an industrial nation—a mighty industrial nation. Twenty thousand extra miles of railways can't be nearly enough. Take one little instance—extra passengers that must have used the railways owing to increased commerce and industrialization. In 1913 the Russian railways carried 180 million passengers; in 1937 they carried 1,142 million men and women.

No, the key is in increased freight-carrying capacity, and this is borne out by Soviet statistics of freight carried. Taking the two years as before, in 1913 the railways carried 132 million tons of freight; in 1937 they carried 536 million tons.

The increased tracks are nothing compared to the increased freight. Traffic density on the 1937 basis was far greater in Russia than in any other country in the world.

Soviet engineers have sought to cope with the growing volume of traffic by improving signal systems and marshalling-yards, and by increasing the speed of goods traffic, though that speed is still less than in Britain or in Germany (which is supposed to have rolling-stock of a pretty poor quality). The Soviet lack of speed is, I am sure, owing not to bad rolling-stock, but to delays on the lines—delays like the ones that held us up so often, irritatingly, for no reason we could discover. It didn't worry the Russians—they just carried on smoking!

Trucks and rolling-stock have been coming off the assembly lines much quicker in the past four years, but a very large percentage of the increase in freight has been absorbed by heavier loading. For example—the daily loading of trucks rose from 27,400 in 1913 to 90,000 in 1937, and 108,000 in 1940. Between 1913 and 1937 the net weight of an average freight train actually rose from 320 tons to 677 tons—an astonishing increase. With this there was an average increase in the daily haul of a truck train from 75 kilometres to 139 kilometres. That is the secret—that is the secret of how Russia must now be getting her goods from the great safe producing centres we saw to the fields of battle. They have piled the trains higher, made them go longer distances—and you can be sure that those distances have increased since the war broke out.

I felt all the way along the Trans-Siberian that it wasn't a model of punctuality. I think it was at Krasnoyarsk that I spoke to an Intourist official on the platform, and asked him how late the train was likely to be at Moscow.

He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled drily. "I think two days," he said. "It is always two days late, so that makes it punctual, yes?"

The Russians are notoriously unpunctual—though they may have changed now they have a life-and-death job of work to do. But I still think the trains will get there in the end.

INTERLUDE AT DINNER

Chapter 7

ONE OF THE THINGS I cannot remember in detail about Siberia or Russia is the scenery, except that it was a great flat white plain that stretched from the border at Manchouli to the turrets and towers and modernistic buildings of Moscow. The only changes were late, at the Urals, and earlier, on the morning of the third day, as we were passing Lake Baikal. Helen and I were standing in the corridor, as the train ran along the southern shore of the great inland sea above the top of Mongolia. From plains we had come for a while into hills and crags and tunnels and valleys—lovely scenery, the best we were to see between Manchukuo and the Urals. Part of the time we were running along a ledge cut into the bank of the lake—a deep slice in the white cliff, as though it had been cut with a cheese-cutter. Out of the left-hand window, the cliff towered above us—we could not see the top of it; out of the right, was Lake Baikal—a lake that was frozen, a sheet of ice, across which occasionally we could see a horse or cart, or once, a lorry.

Baikal is the deepest lake in the world and more than four hundred miles long, though at the southern tip, where we followed it, we only saw its shores for about fifty miles or so. A lot of the time it was snowing—thicker, heavier flakes than we had seen before, but it didn't herald any warmer weather as it was supposed to do in Harbin. At one station where we stopped for quarter of an hour we had to come in as neither Helen nor I could stand it for more than three minutes, for even under the shelter of the station awning it was too cold. Kissling, of course, braved the elements until the very last second, tramping up and down stolidly till the bell rang for all passengers aboard.

There weren't many villages. The settlements were few

and far between, but those we did see mostly had a Christmas-card effect, doubtless because of the thicker snow—it was such a change to see active instead of passive snow.

But the hills at Baikal were the only ones of any size I remember seeing—that is, until we came to the Urals. Otherwise, just flat etiolation. I am certain that this dour climate and scenery for so many months of the year has given much to the dourness of the Russian character. In the train the people reflected the landscape perfectly. Soldiers or civilians would stand beside a corridor window for hours, watching, unblinking, the passing snow and the vanishing rail-tracks behind—no smiles, no jokes, rarely any songs. They looked almost sullen. But they weren't sullen: as soon as we spoke to them their faces lit up, or they would be eager to join in our game of chess or whatever we were doing. They were tough, rather than sullen. Tough as nails. And if you passed one in the corridor he never turned his head to look at you.

There was, of course, a shifting population on the train, but for the most part the cargo was made up of Red soldiers—there were very few women; I think in our coach alone only three, who were dressed inconspicuously, but quite warmly. Now and again a woman porter would board the train and swing her way through from one coach to another. She would be dressed in fur hat with ear-flaps, and a quilted coat similar to those worn by the Red Army skiers, though without any of the markings.

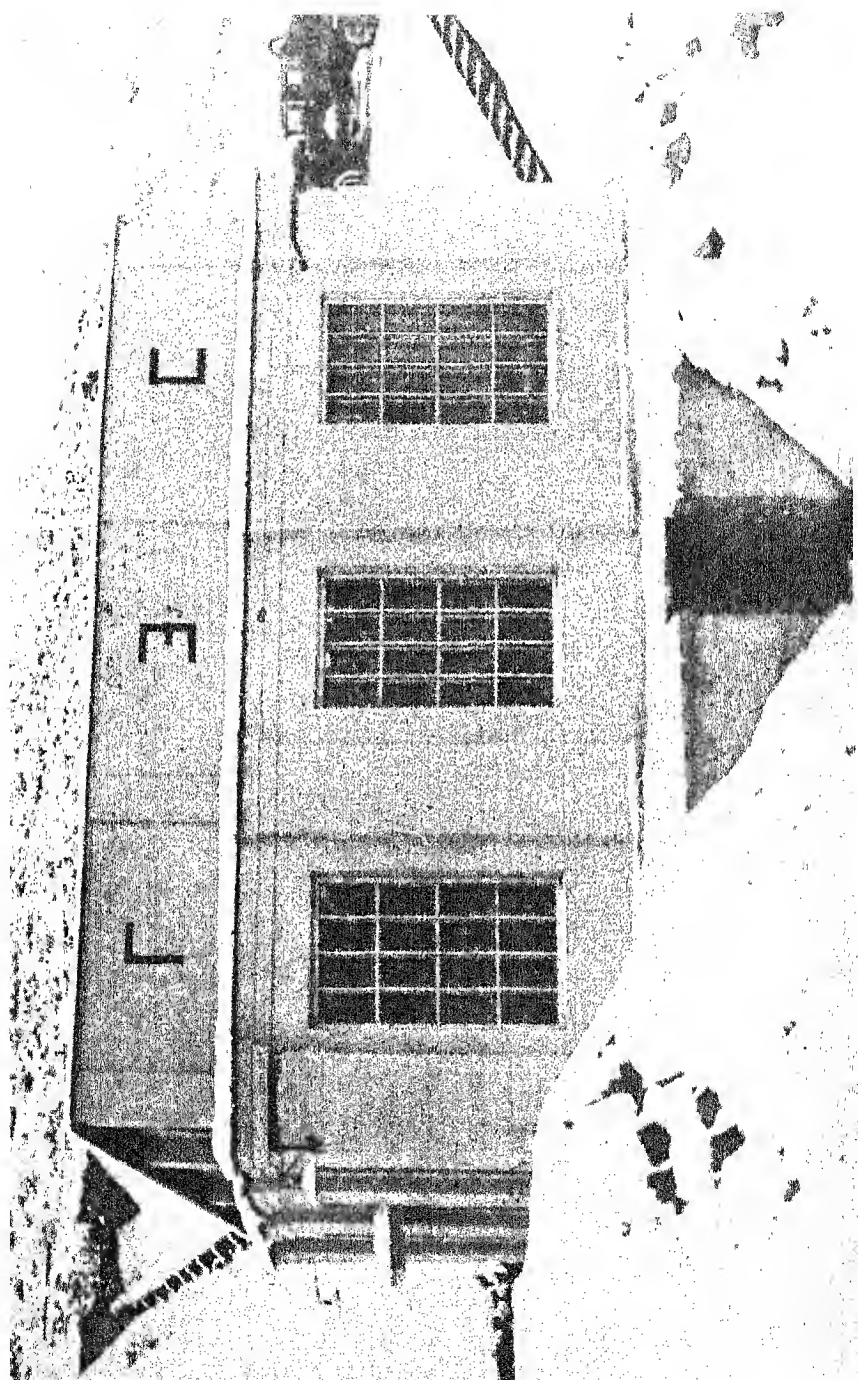
Hansen, the little German, was very unlucky in just clicking the one compartment in which there was a woman and child, for the child squalled all night long, according to Hansen—it certainly squalled every time I passed the compartment. I went into Hansen's compartment, and I was horrified at what I saw—and smelt.

The German had brought three blankets with him: no sheets, no pillow-cases, and for a man suffering from malaria that's bad. The blankets just smelt of sweat; he must have sweated night after night in them, as he had the ague. After all, with malaria it's nothing to have to change the entire bed-

FARMING COUNTRY

A Russian painting of a winter landscape.





clothes five or six times a night, as the patient has a shivering fit, followed by a bath of perspiration—one after the other, all through the night.

However, matters came to a very serious head with Hansen. It happened this way. One night Kissling announced that he was inviting Helen, Hansen, and myself to dinner in the restaurant-car. What a treat! With the current rate of exchange it was going to cost him a small fortune, but we did not see why we should not accept, because he certainly wolfed our fruit whenever he came in for a spot of food.

Believe it or not, we actually dressed for dinner that night. I took off my roll-top pullover and put on a bright checked shirt—as thick a one as I could find, for I never trusted the central heating on that train. I kept my slippers on, of course, and Helen changed her dirty flannel trousers for a skirt.

Owing to the shortage of dining space and the size of the Russian stomachs, we had to make an early appearance. No seats were reserved, and you had to take your turn strictly—which meant, according to Kissling, that if you were late you waited a couple of hours. But it didn't matter. Dinner was at about half-past eight. We arrived at seven o'clock, the first in the dining-saloon, and chose the best table for four people, and got firmly embedded in a corner.

"Please, we are the merry-makers," announced Kissling. "And we have two hours to wait, so we don't wait. We drink."

So they brought the vodka out. Helen wouldn't touch any and neither would Hansen. But I would—and did. Kissling and I got really down to that bottle of vodka, and by eight-thirty I was ravenously hungry.

The very minute Hansen sat down I saw that he was worse than he had been before, but it was very difficult to say anything, because at times he was so very touchy. But he should have been in bed—if he had had a decent bed to lie in instead of the wooden bunk of his hard class with a squalling brat as a companion. His eyes were half-closed, his forehead always damp.

"You don't look well," said Helen. "Try a glass of vodka—it'll do you good."

"Hate it," said Hansen, and tried to smile cheerfully. "I'm a bit under the weather, but I'll be all right."

It was the awful waiting that did it—that made him gradually get worse, because, though dinner was officially at half-past eight, it didn't materialize from our cheery little waiter until nearly ten o'clock. I don't know why. We had stopped asking questions.

I am afraid I did not realize he was quite so ill. It must have been the vodka . . . or Kissling's badinage. Somehow or other, we had let it slip that we were only recently married, and he was full of the usual Germanic sly digs about small sleeping-bunks and the noise at night.

"The dinner it is late," he said about half-past nine, with a look at a great pocket-watch. "It is the pity, because I expect you would like in the bed to be."

"Kissling!" I said, "I'm surprised at you. In front of a lady."

"You are married, yes? Then all's good, and we understand."

He gave us a great spread. We started with caviar—red caviar only—and then shaslik, which though not as good as in Manchukuo, were quite tasty. Shaslik, to be perfect, should consist of a small piece of pheasant, then a square of onion, then a square of fat bacon, then pheasant and onion and so on, skewered one after the other on a long green stick, and cooked over a red-hot fire. Then you slide the pieces on to your plate, and it is a meal for the gods indeed. Still, the Trans-Siberian shaslik wasn't so bad. And, of all things, in honour of the "English lady" Kissling or the little waiter or both of them together produced a dish called "Compote of gooseberries." Bottled gooseberries—and they were perfect. I hadn't tasted a gooseberry for a year.

We had been sitting at that table with its square white cloth for more than three hours when the four glasses of tea with their thin slices of lemon arrived. I was ready for them. We passed the cigarettes round. Hansen took one.

What happened then happened very quickly. I thought I saw him sway as he lit the cigarette.

"Look out!" cried Helen.

Then he sprawled forward. The corner of his elbow caught his glass of tea, knocking it over. The white table-cloth went a bright brown. The stain crept out and out, the pool getting wider and wider.

He was sitting opposite me, and as Helen, who was sitting next to him, tried to hold him up a couple of Red Army men lent her a hand. Somehow we got him out of his chair and into the middle of the compartment. One of the soldiers got hold of a water-jug and threw it into his face. Precious fluid—the drinking-water was strictly rationed.

Hansen began to show signs of life. He shook his wet face and wiped it stupidly with the back of his hand.

"He must to the cabin go," announced Kissling.

He was right—but how we got him there I never quite remember. It must have been six or seven coaches away. We half dragged, half carried him the whole way, our greatest difficulties being at the junctions of the coaches. When we got him there the baby was bawling its head off.

"We can't possibly leave him here," said Helen.

"I'll be all right." Hansen tried to get into his bunk.

"He'd better have one of ours," said Helen. "You can use his just for one night—or share mine, if there's room."

So we dragged and half carried him to ours. There we undressed him and gave him a rub down. He was wet through. We had some sort of combined blanket-sheet which we ripped off the bed so that he could sleep between the blankets. Then we put him to bed in one of my old shirts. That was the best night's sleep he ever had on the Trans-Siberian, poor fellow.

And my worst . . . those bunks are not made for two.

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We were running towards Novosibirsk and the great Kuzbas industrial district—an industrial district almost the size of England—and we were very anxious to drop Hanser off there, to send him to hospital, but he would not have any of it.

"In Russia!" he said the next morning. "I couldn't do it. I wouldn't dare. I don't trust these bloody Russians an inch. They'd kill me."

And later, when Helen was out of the room, he added, "Anyway, Barber, I'm not a fool. I'm dying. I can feel it. I don't even want to live. It's not going to be long now. But I would just like to have another look at Kiel."

There was nothing I could say.

I felt he should have seen a doctor, but he refused resolutely, and lay there sweating, mopping up his quinine, and shivering. The following day we transferred him back to his own bunk, and from then on Helen kept an eye on him, took him things to eat and glasses of tea.

But how like Nazi Germany to send a dying man home as cheaply as possible.

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The nuns helped to look after Hansen, too. Not the stern-faced one with a profile like a hatchet; she kept to her compartment. But the kind old one and Sister Rigmor came out of their shells, so we came in contact with them much more, and I was increasingly intrigued by the young one. At first she had kept her eyes averted when we met, but now she looked at me a little more quizzically, as though trying to weigh me up—but for what?

One afternoon I passed Hansen's compartment, and the kind old nun was inside, arranging his bedclothes and generally tidying up. I wished her good afternoon in Danish, and she replied in her usual mixture of Danish and Swedish. We stopped and talked in the corridor for a few minutes, and then, as casually as I could, I asked her how Sister Rigmor was.

She raised her eyebrows and seemed to draw her big voluminous black cloak further around her. And did not answer. I was to find out later from Sister Rigmor herself just how she was, and why she was travelling back to Sweden. But that was to come.

Poor nuns. How they must have hated that journey, with the snoring soldier in their compartment, with absolutely no

spare money, with no comforts. They had arranged their food in parcels, so much food for each day, rationing it out; and most of it consisted of sandwiches which must have been as hard as iron by the time they reached Moscow. Apart from anything else, I don't think they quite liked the idea of going into the restaurant-car in their 'uniforms'—I gathered that, because Kissling asked them once if they would like three of his meal tickets, but they politely refused.

Instead, as we passed their berth we used to see them chewing away at their sandwiches, drinking tea, in silence. Very oddly, I never *once* saw the Russian soldier awake in that berth. Once or twice his bunk was empty, but I never saw him sitting there reading or talking. He was either asleep or absent. I suppose he disliked being with them as much as the nuns disliked having him.

In the first five or six days, talking to them, I did have one or two odd conversations with Sister Rignior, but always under the eagle eye of Hatchet-face, who sat there like a stone image, speaking volumes by her very silence.

I asked her where the three of them were making for, but all she answered was, "I don't know." There was more desolation in those three little words than in anything else she said.

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So the days went on, the train rumbling along the lines, clacking across the points, passing through villages, through towns, through snow plains, past factory, river, lake, or wood. And the extraordinary thing was the speed with which the time flew. The first two days had been long enough—breakfast to bed-time had seemed a long time. But once we were settled down, and once the routine of the train was established, the time sped on golden wings. There always seemed to be so much to do and so little time to do it. In Shanghai I had bought one or two cheap copies of books I had always felt I should read—I forget their titles now, though I remember I got a dog-eared second-hand copy of Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*.

But had I time to read this improving literature? Not on

your life. I can understand a man having no spare time on board a ship, with all its various delights and pursuits, but on a train I did think there would be time to spare. I was completely wrong. Our cabin became a centre for vital chess matches that sometimes kept us up until one or even two in the morning. Discussions kept us up just as late.

Most of the long waits of the train seemed, fortunately, to be in the day-time, but when we did stop for a couple of hours at about eleven o'clock one night, Kissling, Helen, and I got out to stretch our legs. It was very cold, and we hadn't the faintest idea where the station was, but we wrapped ourselves up to the eyes and went outside on to the platform.

A radio was playing on the brightly lit station. It was packed with people hurrying and scurrying. We stumbled over a bundle of rags in one corner . . . some wretched beggar. And then Kissling espied a small wicket gate leading away from the platform. He pointed to it, and as casually as we could we walked across to it.

We got through that wicket gate like a streak of triple lightning, scrambled down a little alley, and found ourselves in a broad street outside the station.

"I hope they don't want platform tickets to get back," said Helen doubtfully.

For twenty minutes or half an hour we wandered through the town. It wasn't a very important adventure as adventures go, but it was very exciting all the same. The shops were all closed, but the lights were on, and the pavements were crowded with muffled people going home, doubtless, from their Soviet clubs. Where the place was I don't know, but the streets were broad and clean, the buildings quite modern, and there were electric tram-cars. The next day I asked Alexandrov where we had stopped, but he had been asleep and did not know.

After half an hour or so we made our way back, crept through the wicket gate, and strolled up and down the platform, under the noses of the Soviet sentries who stood with fixed bayonets on most of the stations along the line. It was much better than a schoolboy raid on an orchard.

These stops at stations were always exciting. The first

thing to be done was to get busy with pickaxe, and clean the train of ice and shovel away the snow. It was amazing how solidly the ice could form on the chains between two stations. It was as thick as my arm, hard, tough ice, and sometimes every step of the train would be a foot deep in snow—very dangerous, because there were no raised platforms in this part of the world: the platform was on a level with the line itself and if you missed your foot on the step, you went head over heels.

Sometimes, too, they de-frosted the windows. At one station a whole gang of women with long brushes and pails attacked the windows of the train. In quarter of an hour—there were so many of them!—every window had been cleaned, and we could see through them clearly. At each station, too, the links between each coach were inspected, usually by women engineers or porters. They even had women wheel-tappers.

Fuel had to be put aboard as well: fuel not only for the engine, but for each central heating stove in each compartment. Sometimes it was coal, sometimes it was wood—it depended on the district through which we were passing. The wood came in huge logs—birches, roughly sawn off without much time wasted on the trimmings. The poor coach attendants—they were all called guards—had a very uneven life. They had always to be keeping an eye on their stove, and had to watch for fuel reserves at each station. The result was that their sleep was very disjointed; they never got a full night's sleep, and the one in our coach was content for most of the trip, to curl up on a seat without getting out of his brown smock. Once I saw him fast asleep in his astrakhan pill-box hat. His was not a pleasant job. He was responsible for the heating and the water and any individual complaints (few: Soviets don't complain much), and though the interior heating varied from tropic temperatures to Arctic freezes, that wasn't really the fault of the guard. He had room for only a certain quantity of fuel, and if the train stopped for some unknown reason and was delayed two or three hours then the fuel ran out. That was all there was to it.

One day a party of children boarded the train. Scrambling and laughing and cheering, they filled the corridors for two hours until we dropped them off at the next big stop. They were going to visit a big chemical works—a sort of conducted tour with their schoolmaster, a fussy old man with a long grey beard on which, as he entered the train, I discerned an odd icicle where he had been dribbling.

These children came from a large secondary school, and this was one of their regular outings to learn at first hand the mysteries of engineering. In the previous summer they had actually gone on a seven weeks' tour with their master—camping out, visiting big collective farms and great engineering plants and industrial workshops, going down coal-mines, going up in aeroplanes. All for nothing—all education is free, of course, in Soviet Russia. So are all colleges and universities. Indeed 90 per cent. of the students at universities get some living grant as well as free tuition. This ranges, so I was told, from a hundred and thirty roubles a month for the first year to two hundred roubles a month for the last year of their advanced education. They also get free living quarters, and in a number of big cities 'student towns' have been constructed—entire districts of students' dormitories and clubs and so on.

Education has made colossal strides in Soviet Russia. Between 1933 and the year we were there, nearly twenty-five thousand new schools had been built. There were more than seven hundred universities, with well over half a million students attending them—and that, remember, was more than the entire total of all the university students in France, England, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Japan. That is something to think about—there is no idle propaganda there. That is a fact which is going to have a great bearing on Russia's future position in this world of ours.

At a far faster rate than any other country in the world she is producing experts. It must mean, of course, that eventually Russia will have such an overwhelming superiority in expert scientific and engineering knowledge that she is bound to lead the world in new and important developments in these fields. Britain, Germany, Italy, France, will all have to follow. I don't

see that it matters once we settle down to peace, but it is an important point.

These kids on the train were, I suppose, a typical mixed bag—healthy, tough, vigorous, and extremely noisy, with short-cropped hair, in some cases clean-shaven heads like their fathers; they had eager bright eyes. After all, how much would you say education has increased since the days of the Tsars? The answer is 19,000 per cent. They are learning—and they are learning fast. There are elementary schools for all, but I, myself, think that it is in the secondary schools and in more advanced training, that the greatest importance lies, and I got hold of some rather interesting figures in Sverdlovsk. Before the Soviets came to power there were a hundred and twelve thousand students at the universities of Russia. Thirty-five per cent. of these were the children of nobles or big government officials, 10 per cent. were children of the clergy, 11 per cent. the children of business men, and 14 per cent. the children of rich peasants. So that nearly three-quarters of the children who got any chance for higher education were the children of the rich—roughly, I should say, the same ratio as that which exists in Britain to-day. But now, of course, the universities are open to all in Russia—and problems like living away from home are problems no longer. And almost half the students at Soviet universities are women.

The children got off at the next station, a couple of hours later. They clambered down the steps, lined up in an orderly row at the back of the platform, waiting for their fussy little master who darted in and out among them like a possessive old hen. Then they all marched out into the town. That was the last we saw of them.

“My daughter,” said Kissling with a snort, “she will be a real German by now, I am thinking—and I don’t like the real Germans of nowadays. They salute too much and talk too much.”

I don’t think Kissling was very anxious to be going home. It was more or less a duty visit to see his frigid German *Frau* and his offspring.

"But China," he said, "the most wonderful country in the world is not as good as China is not!"

He loved it. He loved every inch of China with all the soul he had in his nice fat, rolling belly. He was a good sort, Kissling.

"I ask my wife to come out and live in China," he said one day. "But she say—no, certainly not. I do not press her. I think German women they are magnificent, but they must be in their own—what do you call them?—their own surroundings. Oddawise they overwhelm everything."

"How long are you going to stay?" I asked him.

"They will say, 'You stay for a year,' but I will not. I have my business attending to, and my odda' tings—you unnerstand? I will stay three months and see what this man Hitler is doing, if he is doing anything, yes? Hansen there, in his bunk, he is always telling me wonderful things he has done. But I like China better."

It was so easy to see the perplexed tortures of poor Kissling, to see the ways his life had changed. We used to sit in our compartment at night, drinking tea, listening to the smooth music of the wheels taking us nearer and nearer to Moscow . . . to Stolpce . . . to Warsaw . . . Berlin . . . and for Kissling, home. He wasn't the only man I met in the East who had fallen in love with China, with the fragrance of pale tea and manners and customs that put our Western civilization to shame in so many respects. I nearly fell in love with it myself. I am sure Kissling would have given a thousand pounds if the train could have turned round with a Disney snort and rocketed him back to Peking. He was middle-aged, getting on for an old man. He didn't want to waste a split second away from the lotus leaves and the green bamboo shoots and the flowers—human and otherwise—of China.

"But I haven't been back for two years," he said. "I must not be a naughty man, must I?"

There is one thing the Russians still do as they did in the days of the Tsars. Queue. I wonder if they will ever get out

of this? I doubt it, for habit dies hard. At dozens of stations, large and small, we would see queues—we did not always know what for, though frequently it was for bread—big, dark brown loaves which a lot of the civilians bought, took into their corridor, cut up with jack-knives, and ate straight away. I suppose they must have been unskilled men earning the minimum salaries. Some soldiers, too, we saw eating bread—dry bread—in the corridor, but most of the Army men seemed to have enough money to buy whatever they wanted in the restaurant-car.

I asked two or three people if there was any shortage. No, they didn't think there was. They had never noticed any—not of bread anyway. But there weren't many shops, they pointed out, and there were sudden rushes as the train arrived in the station. The shop on the platform was overwhelmed. All the same I should have liked to see if there was queuing in the towns as well. I did not see much in those where we stopped.

Mind you, I believe that the Russians just don't mind queuing—even though it doesn't look very good to a stranger passing through a country desolate enough in appearance as it is. And of course the ironic thing was that after the first three stations, there were we doing just the same. Day after day it was my especial job (I could never palm it off on to Helen) to go and queue for hot water. And glad I was to do it. At least it was free. . . .

Later I noticed that most of the queues I saw in the cities were not at food shops, but at places selling goods like cloth or sports equipment or books. For instance, when a new supply of writing-paper or children's books came in the word would go round the town, and the queue would form. Quite often, so I was told, the queues were not even necessary—other shops in the city would have ample stocks, but, no, a new range of goods had just arrived, and everybody queued so that they could have a look and see the quality and price. That may or may not have been true—it smacked a bit of an excuse—but it probably had a grain of truth in it, anyway. Just as a great number of stupid women who could never afford or did not bother to buy expensive chocolate before the war

invariably queue in Harrod's whenever they see a queue already formed, so in Soviet Russia the habit dies hard. It is a hang-over from the Tsars—a capitalistic hang-over, and quite a pleasant way of spending a morning, chatting to your neighbour—for one thing is certain: most of the people in queues were women, and a woman in Russia who isn't working has time on her hands and to spare. I imagine you would probably see much longer queues in the summer—it was too cold when we were there to spend very long standing still in the snow and frost.

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One night, walking through the corridor, I brushed straight past a pure negro, dressed in the uniform of the Red Army. I nearly gasped. He wasn't jet black, but there was no mistaking the negroid features, and he seemed so historically and geographically inaccurate that he might have stepped straight out of a Hollywood film. The next time I saw Alexandrov I mentioned the man, but Alexandrov hadn't seen him, and didn't appear very interested, anyway.

That negro was the strangest of the many strange races that jostled and cluttered up the corridors of the Trans-Siberian. Tartar, Mongol, Kalmyk—they were all there, and as far as we could see, on complete equality with the orthodox Russians. They seemed to have just as much money to spend (those in the forces anyway), they sat at the same tables with them, and joined in their conversations and songs.

Along the whole journey there was one hulk of a man that fascinated me, because, apart for his size, he looked a pure Chinese. His hair had been shaven off, leaving his head as bald as an egg except where the bristles were beginning to sprout. He was dressed most of the time in a blue smock and blue woollen trousers, and we saw him nearly every day in the restaurant-car. He ate even more than Kissling.

At times I could not understand why some of the people—who obviously came from far away—should be on the train at all. They were taking up scholarships, I was told. In some cases they were children who had done exceptionally well at

their local school and were being sent to a central secondary school where they would be boarded and given a living allowance. Though there was a fairly varied cargo before we reached Novosibirsk, the 'bag' became more mixed nearer the Urals, for there we saw representatives of some of the strange races that come from Central Asia. But they came later.

The day before we made Novosibirsk we met a very interesting little fellow, a Soviet school-teacher, who taught Russian economics, history, and English at Omsk, and who had just been cast for a special course. He was small and—for a Russian—quite dapper and neatly dressed.

He translated for me from a Soviet text-book a tabulation showing the populations of the eleven republics which have been created as divisions by the U.S.S.R. I think it is worth reproducing:

| <i>Republic</i> | <i>Area in square kilometres</i> | <i>Population</i> |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Russia Proper | 16,499,400 | 100,178,700 |
| Ukraine | 433,100 | 31,901,400 |
| White Russia | 126,800 | 5,439,400 |
| Armenia | 30,000 | 1,109,200 |
| Georgia | 69,600 | 3,110,600 |
| Azerbaijan | 86,000 | 2,891,000 |
| Uzbek | 370,000 | 5,417,800 |
| Turkoman | 433,600 | 1,268,900 |
| Tadzhik | 143,000 | 1,332,700 |
| Kazakh | 2,744,500 | 6,796,600 |
| Kirghiz | 196,700 | 1,302,100 |
| Total | 21,132,700 | 160,748,400 |

This tabulation is interesting. Russia Proper predominates, of course, but the size and populations of the other republics, each of which have eleven deputies in the Moscow Council of Nationalities, their own languages, their own customs, show that each has to be taken carefully into consideration.

As the schoolmaster pointed out, we should never see, on the Trans-Siberian, some of the most difficult racial problems that Russia has attempted, quite successfully, to solve. White Russia, for instance, which is centred around the capital city of Minsk, and which was used under the Tsars as a settlement district for the Jews who now play such a great part in the life and affairs of the Soviet Union. The Ukraine, of course, we didn't touch either. It is the most densely populated of all the republics and has its own internal problems of race, for its population is made up not only of pure Ukrainians, but of Russians, Jews, Poles, Greeks, Bulgarians, Rumanians, and gipsies—a dangerous mixture of minorities.

The schoolmaster asked—and answered—a question. “Do you know what Lenin called Tsarist Russia?” he asked. “‘A prison of nations.’”

A prison of nations. What a magnificently tragic description. . . .

“I myself think we have tackled this problem of race in the only possible way,” he said. “We have gone for the children. We have concentrated, more than anything else, on the Soviets of to-morrow. I am sure that’s the right way. I have been down to some of the wilder regions of Kirghizian—they still don’t know what it all means. They’re suspicious—or big numbers of them are, anyway. They don’t just understand it. I don’t think, even now, they understand to the full the greatness of the collective farm. All they do know is that they don’t have to work so hard, and they’re getting more to eat. They don’t think any further.”

“Are they getting more to eat?” I asked. I had heard stories of thousands of starving peasants, of collective farm schemes that had gone wrong, of desperate poverty in Siberia in the winter.

The little man shrugged his shoulder. “You’re an intelligent man,” he said. “You can’t change the whole face of a sixth of the earth without something going wrong now and again. Of course it hasn’t all gone smoothly. There was trouble. I think we were too ambitious at first. We opened new schools before we lined the stomachs of the people. That

was a bad psychological mistake. The older people thought we were taking their children away from them and giving them nothing back in return. But we've got over that—at least, I hope we have."

I hope they have.

"Ask yourself one question," he said. "Could these people—particularly the people of central Asia—be any worse off now than they were before the Soviets took over power?"

I told him I didn't imagine they could.

"Their history doesn't make pretty reading," he added. "I know something about it. For a start, everybody except the true Russian was regarded as an alien. He had no rights. Now, one of the first things that makes a country great is freedom of speech and thought and participation in the affairs of a country."

That sounded dangerously like parrot propaganda! Particularly after the way the Soviets have shot thousands for daring to speak their minds. But I let him talk on. There was more than a grain of truth in what he was saying.

"All the workers and peasants had no political rights. We needn't even bother with the swindling that went on right and left—north and south. In the Far North I've met old men still alive who years ago changed a couple of sable-skins with a trader for a sewing-needle. But forget that. What the Tsars did most of all was to try to sow dissension among the various races. They had the Russians fighting the Jews, the Armenians fighting the Azerbaijanians, and so on—anything to stop the people having time to fight the Tsars, who had just one plan—to keep the peasants and the workers in ignorance and darkness. Could anything be worse than that?"

Not much. And even though some of the developments may still be a little lop-sided, and little pockets of wilderness may still be untouched by the Soviets, I do think they have done an amazing job of work in unifying the differing races that make up their whole.

The first thing was to bring them plenty. And very often that plenty was in the ground, right under the feet of the peasants, waiting, only to be exploited. Coal, minerals,

precious metals. The backward races of Soviet Russia could never have got those out of the ground by themselves. Derricks, mines, factories, dot the landscape—paid for by the State, providing work for the peasants who now get a regular return which, if it isn't as high as some people in this country think it should be, is at least higher than it ever was before.

And with it, they have got a great deal more than their simple wages—because I felt all through Russia that wages are only one small part of the return the worker expects. Other advantages are education, both for young and old, free sports, free travel, free books: the worker in Russia gets paid a great more in kind than the worker of this country ever does.

In the summer the Soviets brought tractor combines and harvester squads. The small peasant's holding disappeared, and the broad acres were made to yield up a harvest never before dreamed of in these fertile valleys. That, in most cases, must have meant more food, unless of course the food was taken away to places like Moscow. Was it? I didn't ask—because the answer in Russia would have been obvious. I don't see why it should have been, though I tried very hard—without any result—to get one figure I wanted. In central Asia almost all the production in summer has been turned over to the growing of cotton. How much, I asked several people, of the land is still used to cultivate food? Or was it all cotton and was food brought into this gigantic cotton-field? Nobody could—or would—answer.

But my little schoolmaster was right. The Soviets have struck deep into the minds and hearts of their backward autonomous states by the most potent weapon of all—education. But what a colossal job! Many of these nationalities had to start their scholastic development from scratch—from a mark before scratch. They spoke their own language, but that was all. They could not write it. They had first of all to create their own alphabet, their own ABC. They had to write and publish grammar books, books about their own language—all that even before the first school went up, before the first building was opened, and the first children crossed the threshold of a new life.

No mean job, that. "In Kirghizian," said my little schoolmaster, "there was only one signature—the print of a man's right thumb, pressed down hard. That was all. One out of every two hundred could write and read. I've read figures which show that before the Revolution (he was off again!) four thousand boys and girls went to school. Now that number is well over a quarter of a million. In Kirghizian we've got nearly two thousand schools, including fifteen high schools.

"I once stayed at a little village in which everything in the old days was owned by one man. The villagers themselves had to do the best they could with bogs and woods—that was all that was left to them—and that was eight miles from the village. Now it's a collective farm village. I should think there's a radio in every other house. They've got schools, clubs, a hospital—everything they want."

He was undoubtedly speaking the truth—we had passed through many progressive collective farm villages in Siberia which were unquestionably peasants' prisons before the revolution.

"I also spent three years in the Far North," added my school teacher. "I was with the Evenks on the shores of Tixie Bay. That's at least seventy degrees north. My boys were like Esquimaux—completely different from the Russians—fat, chubby little boys with tiny slits for eyes and straight black hair. Every single one of their fathers was illiterate. Every one of their mothers, too. A few years before I went up to the Soviet Arctic they didn't even have an alphabet. We gave them one. We opened schools.

"That in itself was a revolution. Their fathers and mothers just couldn't understand the need for them—they just couldn't; and we were up against a terrific problem from another angle. Some of the little villages up there consisted of only half a dozen houses. We couldn't possibly open up a school for a dozen children. One village was miles from the next. So we started boarding-schools. We took the children there—we had to fight like fury to persuade the parents to let their children go—we boarded them free of charge, we

clothed them, we looked after them. That, of course, was an amazing adventure.

"Nearly everybody of promise that I taught went away to a higher school, and then went back to the Arctic as a teacher—I don't approve at all, in the usual run, of sending boys and girls to school just to turn them into teachers. You must turn them into creative experts. But at first all the scholars were teachers, just so that we could get going. We've turned out some fine boys and girls in the Arctic since then—and think of it, little more than twenty years ago, and they hadn't even got an alphabet."

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On this question of race. You never think of Russia as having a Jewish problem to solve. But it certainly did have at one time—one just as difficult as Hitler's. Under the Tsars Jews were not allowed to hold any big government positions; they had no voice in politics, and the rulers of Tsarist Russia turned on the hate with a venom that must have been an example to the Nazis.

The Jews were confined to a special settlement. They were not permitted to live in central Russia, in the old St Petersburg, and in a number of other Russian cities—though there were doubtless some influential Jews in the cities, just as there are in Germany to-day. But Jews could only be admitted to schools under a quota system—I think it was 3 per cent. of the total number of students in the big cities like Moscow, and 5 per cent. in other cities. One of the few great landscape-painters Russia has ever produced—Levitan, whose pictures can be seen in Moscow to-day—was actually deported from Moscow because he was a Jew.

Now—whatever one thinks of the Jews in this country, or rather of that section of the Jews who are totally indifferent to victory so long as they line their pockets well—the Jews are certainly playing an enormous part in the social and economic life of modern Russia. We literally saw dozens of them on the train—in uniform, out of uniform. They have contributed much to modern Russia. The Russians gave them

complete equality with the Russians proper, as they did with other races, and the result has been, on the whole, a remarkable unity over a remarkable continent.

In many ways I think the races we saw formed the most fascinating background to the whole journey—standing there in the corridors, tramping the platforms, eating in the restaurant-car—dozens of nationalities, dozens of races, dozens of languages, thoughts, creeds, customs—all under the Red Flag. And all the poor ones, I am certain, better off than they ever were before the Revolution.

COLLECTIVE FARM

Chapter 8

THE TRAIN HAD BEEN A LONG TIME crawling along the desert that separates the first industrial region of Irkutsk, from the second, which is centred around Novosibirsk. We had seen nothing for many hours but small wayside halts—miserable, desolate snowbound places which looked cold and uninviting, peopled by men and women and children who looked equally cold despite their warm, if shabby-looking clothes. Perhaps the weather had worsened; yes, I think that was it. The skies that had been tinged with blue were now leaden and heavy, and every now and again thin savage snow would beat violently against the panes of our carriage window or in our face as we tramped up and down the platforms for exercise. But a few hours before we reached Novosibirsk—before we got to the region of industry that has sprung up around there—the weather cleared, a watery sun came out, and as the train stopped, Alexandrov, who had been talking to the guard, suddenly came up to me and said:

“We’re stopping here for an hour or so. Would you like to see something?”

I nodded. The place where we stopped looked pretty much like a hundred others we had seen—a small two-platform station with one brick building, a Red Flag flying high and a large picture of Stalin on the left-hand side of the building, with Lenin on the right-hand side. Beyond—a few hundred yards away from the station—was the village proper. “That’s where we go,” Alexandrov pointed.

Helen and I wrapped ourselves well up—two pairs of trousers, fur hats, pullovers, two or three shirts. It’s a lovely feeling, in a really cold climate, the wearing of clothes in *bulk*—as if you are wrapped round and round with sacking. Even so, the cold air was like a knife as we jumped out of the train

on to the hard snow of the platform, and walked towards the cluster of long huts.

Alexandrov certainly was a passport in Russia. The station guard let us pass with a smile, and we strode along a well-packed snow road away from the train . . . only for an hour or so, but still, away from the train. That meant a lot.

"This," said Alexandrov, "is a collective farm. It's called the Victory Collective Farm. It is one of thousands in the country, and they are the basis of our peace-time life, and of any war in which we shall fight."

I didn't ask what he meant—Alexandrov had a habit of popping out with a text-book phrase now and again. They were best left alone. But anything less like a farm it was difficult to imagine in its present state. It looked as though the earth could never yield fruitful results. Until we got inside, that is. . . .

The huts were wooden. There were about half a dozen of them, long and low and snow-covered. "This is the centre of the system," explained Alexandrov. "The farms are scattered around. Look!" And he pointed to houses tucked away in the snow.

He pushed open the door of the first hut. It was a sort of central office, and inside, sitting at a desk, was a good-looking Russian; an elderly man, he looked—about fifty-five or even more. He was the director, and to him Alexandrov spoke in Russian while we waited like little schoolchildren.

The elderly man spoke to a woman clerk, and Alexandrov turned to us. "She has gone to fetch the political chairman. He can speak English. He will explain everything." I suspect Alexandrov was getting tired of acting as our mouthpiece! But the political chairman, when he arrived, was more than expansive, seizing a golden opportunity to air his rusty English—he spoke it quite well.

We shook hands, and then he showed us round. The office itself was reasonably well furnished, and had the usual double walls and windows and was quite warm. The walls, painted (a long time ago) cream, were covered with posters showing Soviets at varying work, all of course putting their backs

into it. They were doubtless propaganda posters. On one wall though was a large board on which in chalk a lot of names were written.

"Those are last summer's names," said the political chairman, whose name was Semyon. "They are the men and women of the farm who did more work than they need have done. One of them has since received the Order of Lenin. Stalin gave it to her. There will be another list of names on the board next year."

These boards of honour were put up in all collective farms. The names of the best workers were written on them, and from these a few were selected by authorities or newspapers, and 'plugged' until the best of the batch was given the coveted Order. Just as valuable (to my mind but not to Semyon's) was the fact that most of the people on the board had received some profit in kind for their work. Some had got an extra pig, others extra grain, one or two, so I was told, extra money. That, surely, was intelligent, for in Russia as in any other country, solid rewards are always the greatest incentive to good work. That is human nature and has nothing to do with politics.

I asked how big the farm was, and the answer I got, the way the farm had grown, was astonishing. All the surrounding country—rich, good grain-growing country—had been in the hands of about half a dozen landowners, I was told. When the Victory Collective Farm was started there were forty-one families in it. They each had their own farm, but everything was pooled. When things began to go well—there were many difficulties at first—scores of other families from the district joined in. Some came to live in communal wooden huts put up by the Government. Others, on the fringe of the farm, joined in and used their own homes. The land for this great enterprise was, of course, seized from the wealthy owners whose families had held it for so long.

"At first some of them worked for us as ordinary labourers and shock workers," said Semyon. "But they were too difficult. They tried to incite the workers; they sabotaged the national effort. So we liquidated them."

"Liquidated?" I asked. It is a favourite Soviet word and can mean a number of things.

Semyon shrugged his shoulders. "Some we banished, some we shot," he replied.

Now, the Victory Farm had two hundred and fifty families living on it—the best part of a thousand people. They had a dairy-farm, a number of horses (still very scarce in Russia and much prized as the Army has first pick), and of course the use of the tractor and sowing brigades as and when required.

What I wanted to know most of all, of course, was what the workers got out of the farm. These thousand or so people—how much better off were they now than under the old landowners? Much better? Or did the State, as I had a feeling I had read, take the whole lot from them except, perhaps, a bare subsistence allowance of grain?

"You must know first of all," said Semyon, "how we work."

And this is how he explained it to us as we walked through the buildings, in the cold outhouses, through the model dairy (a very good one) and other places, like the communal dining-room, where meals cost two roubles a head (cheaper than in the average factory, I noted).

First of all, every member of the Collective Farm had to pay forty roubles to join. Some of this went to the Government, some to the communal buildings, while if the man or woman left the farm half of it was refunded. But the most important thing of all is that wages vary on the collective farm just as they do in the factory or workshop—and they vary according to results.

I found the way they worked this out very complicated—Semyon's English wasn't good enough to talk about fractions and so on, but roughly this is the system. When the year on the farm is finished the total number of working days are totted up. Fairly simple. Then the amount of profit earned—the net profit—was arrived at, and by dividing the first into the second, they find out what the earnings were for an average day. (More about the net income in a minute.)

That would be fairly simple if all workers on a farm were paid at the same rate, but obviously they cannot be. A trained

executive is worth more than an unskilled labourer learning the job. To get over this problem the Soviet Government has formed five or six grades of working men and women, ranging from shock workers on tractors, who get credited *two* days for every one day they work, to unskilled labourers, who get credited with only *half* a day for every one worked. It is, so far as it goes, a very simple way of calculating work, and it means that a highly skilled man who works exactly the same number of days as an unskilled one earns exactly four times as much. Grades in the middle get varying credits from three-quarters to one and a half days' work for each day actually worked. Quite simple once you get down to it.

"Of course I must make one thing plain," pointed out Semyon. "We have to sell a fixed percentage of our produce to the State at prices fixed by them."

"And they are low?" asked Helen.

"Not bad. The Government doesn't want to see these farms fail. The collective farm and the State farm are the backbone of the country. If they go well then Russia can never starve. And there can't be much wrong with a country basically if the people have enough to eat and enough clothes to wear can there?"

I asked him about the net income, for it seemed to me that if the grain and other produce were sold at too low a price there wouldn't be very much net income left, and if the harvest was really bad the workers would find at the end of the year that there was nothing in the kitty for the great share-out.

He pooh-poohed that. And though it was quite natural for him to do that, I believe what he said—for remember that this was no hand-picked farm I was visiting by courtesy of the Soviet Embassy, but one at which our train had happened to stop.

"We have a lot to pay out, of course," he said, "but if you go to any one of those houses there you will see something that you could never have seen in Russia thirty years ago—small farm-houses in which a peasant family lives—and do you know what they've got? They've got a pig or a cow or some hens—yes, every one of them. And they've bought them out of their earnings. Never in the old days did a

peasant earn enough to buy any stock for his farm. I don't think there is one single family on this farm that hasn't got its own little patch and his own animals."

The outgoing payments are certainly heavy. The Government has usually to be repaid over a number of years—quite a heavy mortgage—for advances for seeds and modern equipment, but that, after all, is only fair. Then the tractor brigades, who serve a number of collective farms in the same large district, have also to be paid—and they earn good money. But there is still enough left.

"The main thing," declared Semyon emphatically, "is that *the land belongs to the country*. That is the most important point. Nobody can own land and buy and sell it as they did in the old days. It belongs to the people to share. It doesn't even belong to the farmers—it belongs just as much to the factory workers who make tractors for us. And the farmer whose cattle are allowed to graze on our collective farm—he does that on the Government's land. That is the secret."

He paused and looked over the white rolling fields, out towards small copses and a small snake of ground that you could hardly see was a frozen river covered with a thin sprinkling of snow. "Of course," he said, "you should see it in summer. This is the quiet time. When the cattle are grazing in the fields and the women are working on the wheat, then you see the collective farm at its best. Now it looks so bare that you can't even imagine that it *is* a farm."

That was perfectly true. Think of making rose-jam on that bare ground—rose petals picked wild off the hedgerows!

"What do you *do* in the winter?" I asked.

"You are not a farmer," he laughed. "There is always work on a farm—particularly a farm of a thousand people. Buildings have to be repaired, the ground has to be watched, the dairy-farm carries on, everything has to be made ready for sowing—but don't think," he hastened to add, "that we neglect our peasants' cultural pleasures. Oh, no!"

He said that almost as we opened the door of the communal dining-room, and I must say that as a canteen it would take some beating. The walls were covered with posters and

bright, vivacious pictures—many of them of pretty girls walking through fields of corn up to their shoulders—and he pointed out another board with names scrawled across it. “We write the board up in the eating-room as well,” he said.

The tables were for eight people each—I should think the place would probably hold a couple of hundred at one sitting, though that might be an exaggeration. I had no time to count the tables, but it looked as though there were a couple of dozen. There was nobody in the room, but a radio was going full blast, and Semyon pushed open a door at the end, and we walked into a room filled with books. That was the library. At the other end was a fairly large room converted, with a rough wooden stage, into a theatre with long wooden forms in the place of plush seats. I ran my fingers along the keys of a fairly good piano of German make.

“It *must* be the right way,” said Semyon. “It stands to reason that a lot of poor peasants, each with only a few primitive tools and no money to buy good modern equipment, cannot do as well for themselves and for the country as when they band together. I’ll admit that we did not improve our output very much before the first of the Five Year Plans, but that was because we could not get the tractors. Now we’ve got as many as we want—hundreds of thousands of them in Russia—and that was all we needed.”

He switched on the light, then switched it off. “Twenty years ago there wasn’t an electric cable within two hundred miles. Now every home has electric light.”

We did not have much of an opportunity of meeting the actual people. That was a pity. The shape of a man’s stomach, the smile of a woman’s face, is as good a guide to contentment as I have ever known, and though the few we did see seemed happy enough, they were not a big enough cross-section to satisfy us. They were all shoddily dressed.

One of the other buildings was a general shop in which the collective farmers could spend their spare money. It was stocked mostly with what seemed to be foreign articles—pens, pencils, bright textiles—particularly big squares for the

women's heads in summertime—a few books, writing-paper, ink. Another counter was given over to food—naturally, non-farming food. Stuff like oranges and apples. None of them had price tickets, but the oranges on investigation proved to be three roubles each. They were the cheapest oranges I found in Russia.

“Once a week we get a travelling cinema here,” said Semyon. “The only thing that occasionally holds it up is the weather. Sometimes the car doesn’t get through. We also have visits by choirs and dramatic groups, and three of the farms have joined together to form their own dramatic group.”

“I don’t see any cars,” I said. “I don’t see any mechanical transport.”

“There is nothing to transport now,” he argued. “We stay on the farm in the winter. There’s nothing to go away for, nothing to do. We’ve got one big car—but it’s very rarely that we use it in the winter. Anyway, time costs nothing here.”

How different from a British farm, I thought, as we left the ‘shop.’ Not all the individuality, maybe, but is that worth everything? I thought of the farms and farmers I had known in my life, of the grand young men of England earning a couple of pounds a week for the whole of their family (if they were lucky!) for making the soil of their own land yield a good harvest. It seemed to me at least that in Soviet Russia, on a farm such as this, there was a definite and close relationship between peasant and factory worker. I even agree with the sale of cheap harvests, because surely that means that food must be cheaper for the worker in the city, who can then—and this has been proved—produce his machines more cheaply, so helping the farm.

I asked Semyon a question. “On the station platform,” I said, “an old woman was selling food. Was she from the farm—and who keeps the money she makes if she sells anything?” (She most assuredly would sell something. The passengers were around her like flies before we were off the platform.)

That, explained Semyon, was quite in order. There was nothing in the regulations of a collective farm to stop a peasant from selling his surplus food—the stuff he has grown

on his own patch. But of course it had to be the product of his own hand—or at any rate of his own family. No man could sell to another collective farmer for resale, but they could sell to the public, for their consumption, all the eggs, butter, milk, and vegetables they wanted.

"When the collective farm meets every year," added Semyon, "and a chairman is chosen, and the executives are picked, we also split up all the food—the grain and so on—we have left over after selling our quota to the State. We also have to give a certain proportion of the grain to the Tractor Station—that is the payment they get for helping us with our harvests, and they get paid in kind, not always in money.

"Then we split up the rest. We reserve some for invalids and people who can't work, then share out on the basis I mentioned of days worked. What the peasant does with his own share is no concern of ours. If he wants to make bread for his wife to sell on the station that's all right."

The buildings were grouped rather like the spokes of a wheel—they were long and low and branched out from a large circle of open ground. But the time was getting on, and we did not have an opportunity to visit them all—the school, the rest house for mothers with young children, the nursery where children could be left while their mothers worked in the field.

Instead we had to walk back to the office and say thank you for the visit. Out of the corner of my eye I could see another train coming into the station, a few hundred yards away—doubtless the connexion for which we had been waiting.

"It's been marvellous," Helen said to Semyon. "The only thing I haven't seen is milk."

"You like *milk*!" his voice seemed almost horrified! But in three minutes in it came—two big mugs of rich, creamy milk. We drained them before dashing back to the train. It was the one and only time in the whole of Soviet Russia and Siberia that I tasted milk. And it was the best advertisement the Victory Collective Farm could ever have given me.

"The train!" said Alexandrov solemnly. "It will not wait for people who spend their time drinking."

But then Alexandrov could knock back vodka like water.

THE BLACKSMITH'S BASIN

Chapter 9

NOVOSIBIRSK.

That is the central city of the richest region the world has ever known, the Kuzbas Basin, which sprawls across the Trans-Siberian railway, north and south. We reached it on the fifth day. It had been snowing, but soon after breakfast it cleared, and while we were looking out of the double window of the corridor Helen pointed to the horizon.

"It looks like rain," she said.

Sure enough it did. Painted on the leaden horizon were flecks and streaks of black distant clouds.

"But it can't rain at this time of the year, can it?" I asked Alexandrov.

He lit one of his never-ending supply of cardboard cigarettes, squinted towards the end of our world, and laconically said, "Smoke."

And that was our first sight of the Kuzbas Basin, the Blacksmith's Basin, so named because it was there that the Mongol Genghis Khan forged his weapons before attacking the Western world in the thirteenth century.

History is repeating itself. After a lapse of seven centuries, during which the Kuzbas has hardly been utilized, it is now once again the great forge of a nation, only this time to beat the invader poised and striking east. In the last fifteen years great thriving cities have sprung up on land which is so rich that you can sow and harvest your crops in less than four months.

For hours as we approached Novosibirsk we passed through cities and towns black with smoke. The snow on the ground looked dirty and hard. Except for the wooden houses—arranged mostly in neat, orderly rows—we might have been going through Barnsley or Sheffield on a cold winter's day.

It was not a glamorous site—unless you suddenly reflected that the town through which you were passing simply did not exist fifteen years ago.

For the Kuzbas is one of the greatest results Russia has to offer from her Five Year Plans. It is roughly half-way from Vladivostok to Moscow. It lies well to the east of the Ural Mountains—I should say a thousand miles or so—and it gets much of its power from the great River Ob.

Here, if you like, is a classic example of planning, of following the trail of raw materials in much the same way as the American western townships sprang up in the old days when gold or oil was discovered. For in the Kuzbas region there is enough coal for the world, and the rich black soil is fertile enough almost to feed the entire population of the world. There are a quarter of a million square miles of rich arable land in that region alone—and that is more than twice the area of the whole of Britain. And underneath is as much coal as the entire world could use for year after year. I was given a figure of five hundred thousand million tons as a likely estimate of the reserves.

Even to us in 1939 there was a new, fresh look about all this region. It did not look clean—no coal basin ever could; but you missed the rows of drab back-to-back grey houses that line the streets of the Welsh mining valleys. Perhaps our impression was heightened because the idleness of those towns was missing too. Nothing—nothing on God's earth—can be more depressing than the lolling figure, in muffler and worn cap, who stands waiting for the day when he will draw his old-age pension. Men without work, men without hope. I saw them so often when I lived in the bleak despondency of an unemployed South Wales.

Of course I had no means of knowing what the unemployment statistics were in a place like the Kuzbas region, but I doubt if they were very high—there didn't seem to be any need for unemployment, because Russia even then could use all the coal that miners could get out of the ground. She was already arming quickly, quite apart from her peace-time needs. And anyway, we were both struck with the appearance of

busyness—there just weren't any idlers in the cold, snow-covered streets.

The ground is rich in other minerals as well as coal—particularly in some of the metals that are so highly important in the modern armaments industry. And that, of course, is where the Soviets have scored. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, they have everything on the spot. When I was allowed to poke my nose (but not much more!) inside a steel factory at Novosibirsk I was told that all the manganese they wanted came from the near-by town of Masulsk, whereas a few years ago it had all to be transported from Georgia and the Ukraine, a couple of thousand miles away. Practically all the iron ore needed in Novosibirsk and the surrounding cities came from new mines recently opened up at places which are within reasonable distance. That used to have to come from the Urals, twelve hundred miles or so away.

In this Novosibirsk factory, which was making steel for tractors (now tanks?) I learned something of the growth of the Kuzbas. It was difficult to get into the place for a start—the Russians are very cagey about allowing strangers to see any factories or works which might one day be turned into armaments factories. They always have had spy-mania. But when we steamed into Novosibirsk I found we had four hours to wait, and I asked Alexandrov if Helen and I could both have a quick look round the town.

He seemed doubtful, but he went to the biggest stone building, and after some minutes returned with a civilian dressed in black coat, felt knee-boots, and a brown fur hat with flaps tied over the top. He was an Intourist man, and could speak excellent English.

I explained what I wanted. I was tired of trains and snowy platforms lined by resolute soldiers whose job it was to keep us on them. "I want a walk round the town with my wife, that's all," I said.

He had to go away to the train guard to get our passports (the guard kept them for the whole trip), and then he came back and nodded his head.

"That's all right," he said. "I will take you for an hour—the charge will be twenty roubles."

Well, that was less than a meal for both of us, anyway.

Now it must be clearly understood that our inspection of this city was 'conducted'—we had no freedom of movement, we could only see what we were allowed to see. It had none of the easy-going atmosphere of the little visit Alexandrov and I made to see Soviet ski troops in action outside Chita. But at the same time, what I wanted to find out most of all was the history of the growth of the Kuzbas. Alexandrov didn't know much about it, and I myself knew practically nothing, except that it hadn't been there fifteen years before.

Intourist shepherded us into a car—a Ford, of all things—and we skidded gently along the main streets for ten minutes or so. Novosibirsk had a surprisingly modern look—wide streets, clean grey stone buildings partly clothed in white snow, big shops, plenty of cars, plenty of people. Almost all the buildings in the main streets were of stone, and we went into one big departmental store which would not have been out of place in Oxford Street. It was five stories high with a huge well in the middle over which you could peer and see right down to the bottom.

"All things very cheap," said Intourist proudly, pointing to the price tickets. They didn't look cheap to us—I could never get to the bottom of this controlled currency. I saw a small sailor's cap for a boy of about eight—it was on a dummy—and it cost twenty-five roubles. A pair of cloth slippers cost sixteen roubles—I had a pair exactly the same in the train, and I had bought them for two and sixpence in Shanghai for the journey (I have still got them). In the wine department, bottles whose contents I could not judge all seemed to be two or three pounds, and cigarettes were two shillings for twenty-five—and very inferior at that. But, as I say, they were only expensive to us. Intourist quite obviously thought they were ridiculously cheap. It was all a question of exchange.

Intourist—the only name we knew him by—was a rather pleasant old boy, and our spell with him resolved itself into a pumping match: he was desperately anxious to learn as

much as he could about Britain, for I do not suppose that in Novosibirsk he had many opportunities of airing his excellent English, which he had learned entirely in Russia.

"You should be here in summer," he said. "You get the most lovely wild flowers, and we make jam out of our roses. It is very hot, but we have plenty of woods to shade under. Why do all English people always come in winter, when it's cold?"

It seemed impossible to think that the cold streets, through which an icy wind was blowing, could ever be warm and sunny.

"I have been here seventeen years," said Intourist. "I have seen it all. I have seen all this grow—and all the big towns around. I remember when Stalinsk had only eighteen houses. Only eighteen! Now it has a population of quarter of a million. Even three years ago (that meant in 1936) Novosibirsk had only a hundred thousand people. Now look at it—half a million. As big as your Sheffield."

Yes, it was. An astonishing increase, and I wonder now, with the movement east of the armament's industry, how many people live in Novosibirsk to-day.

We went into a small café for some tea and lemon—a shilling a glass, but never mind. Intourist offered us cardboard cigarettes which we accepted. "You know," he said, "that the chief town in the old days was Kutnetzk. Now the biggest cities are Novosibirsk, Stalinsk, Kutnetzk, Kemerovo, and Krasnoyarsk, of course. They're all in the Kuzbas basin. We produce . . ." (I forget the actual figures he gave of production. They were only percentages, and they meant nothing anyway.)

"I suppose it was eleven years ago when it all started. That was the first Five Year Plan. Yes, 1928. At that time the whole country was agricultural. It was farming in summer, and skating and skiing in the winter. Nothing else. I have seen cows being milked just outside," and he jerked his thumb towards the street.

"At that time there were only two or three mines for getting coal in the whole of this region. They were only put up

because coal was wanted for the Trans-Siberian. That was all. Otherwise—cows. I like cows better than coal-mines.”

So do I.

“I suppose really we started out with Stalinsk. That took us four years to build. That was hard, because we had to work all through the winters as well as the summers. I didn’t like it at first, I’ll admit. It was country, four or five miles from Kutnetzsk—lovely country, too, in summer. But in 1928 a whole crowd of colonists came out—(it seemed funny to hear the word colonist, but Siberia is, in a way, a Soviet colony)—and they did one thing anyway—they taught me my English.”

I looked dutifully inquisitive.

“Why? Because dozens of Americans came. Dozens of them. Young and old. All engineers. I think there were some English too. At that time my wife was alive, and I kept a small hotel. Very small, you know . . . and two of them came to live with us. I forget their names now, but they both came from New York. Very young, they were, but they had the right spirit. All the way through four years the Americans and the Russians and the English worked to build Stalinsk. They had to start with nothing. They hadn’t even a place to live.”

Many of them, he said, had lived in caves, but the Americans built wooden houses in the forests. They brought their own cars and their machines—cranes and boring tools and so on. Intourist helped to work with them through one summer. They organized dances too.

“My Americans were awful in the summer,” he added. “They would come home from the factory, change, go dancing, and just get back in the morning in time for breakfast—and in the summer they would have a swim in the river before going back again.”

It was Helen who asked him how the native people of the soil took to this second revolution.

“Well, of course at first they couldn’t understand it,” said Intourist. “The engineers had an awful job to persuade the wandering gipsies and small farmers to co-operate. After all,

Siberia is a hard country—for eight months of the year anyway—and the one thing which the Russian engineers could never drill into the farmers' heads at the beginning was that if they *did* give up their farms they would not starve. It is man's instinct in Siberia—it always has been—to gather during the summer enough food to last him through the winter. That is perfectly natural. And when the town-planners with all their designs straight off the President's desk in Moscow arrived and promised the farmers and herdsman that they would be fed—well, the locals just didn't believe them.

"They had to put down first a number of great collective farms—some of them thirty thousand acres—and grow wheat and raise cattle. Only then did the Tartars leave the land to work in the factories. Only then did the Siberians start to learn bricklaying and housebuilding and electricity. And in return they got all the food they wanted, and all the milk—and quite a lot of the girls fell in love with the Americans."

He shook his head. "No. Very few married them. The Americans are very—very businesslike, aren't they?"

Even now, the Kuzbas is still being built. It is not finished yet. All the cities within its region are new; they bear the stamp of modernity. They have been planned and built around coal-mines, steel plants, light metal foundries, each one complete with its housing, schools, hospitals, and even parks for the population—which, incidentally, must be an active population. There is no room in these modern industrial regions of Soviet Russia for people who cannot work, for the whole basis of these regions is one of collective planned effort. So many men are needed to produce food for the engineers, so many miners, so many transport men, so many public utility men—the figures are all worked out in Moscow; and then put into operation.

The building of these cities has been one of the most fantastic stories of the last twenty years. The stone for the houses of Novosibirsk came from near-by quarries—otherwise, you can be sure, the houses would have been built of wood. Nothing has been imported except the original tools and the high-grade labour. If Krasnoyarsk wants half a dozen

new train-cars then it makes them itself; the same with railway trucks or dentists' chairs.

And still the cities are springing up, still being increased in size. For fifteen years they have been hard at it, long winter and short summer, writing the story of the Kuzbas, the Blacksmith's Basin that is to-day forging the weapons where Genghis Khan forged them hundreds of years ago.

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We finished our tea. I paid, and then we moved on to one of the great steel-rolling mills of the city. We had to wait outside, shivering in the incredible cold, while Intourist went in to see whether we could be allowed to follow him. When we did get in there was little to see other than great spreading workshops and more women working the machines than you see in Britain even to-day. The batteries of women were indeed remarkable—but, of course, that is understandable, because there is no bar to Soviet women becoming engineers or working in engineering factories, as there normally is in Britain. The Soviets have no narrow-mindedness about women's place in the scheme of things, whatever other faults they have (and Communism is not perfect). But in Britain the engineering trades union bosses—men of the stamp of Bevin, whom nobody can say shines as an example of translucent idealism for women—the union bosses have rigorously stamped on any attempt by unskilled labour of either sex to get a foothold. Actually, of course, as a Soviet said to me in Krasnoyarsk, the whole thing is a ramp, though engineers have, of course, to protect themselves. There will always, I know, be dozens and dozens of jobs of a highly technical engineering nature which only skilled workers can do—but there are, equally, dozens and dozens of engineering mass-production jobs which can be done after only a minimum of training. If the engineers in Britain, after the war still want to keep their business a closed shop, well, that's their affair. It might protect them against capitalism. It won't help the working classes.

At the Novosibirsk Rolling Mills we did meet for a few

minutes a woman whom we saw later on the train, travelling on to Moscow. She was just packing up to go to the station, and she was a member of a gang of engineers who travelled from factory to factory, from workshop to workshop, as and when required. She was fairly young and was dressed, like most Soviet women, in a very unassuming way. Her black clothes were old-fashioned and in a London street would have looked dowdy; but there is a great difference between clothes that are dowdy and clothes that are worn out. Though uninteresting sartorially, the girl—we found out later that her name was Natasha—wore clothes that were thick and warm. She had felt boots reaching to her knees, a thick black coat over her blouse, and a woollen hat.

Later she told us that it was seven months since she had seen her husband and her son. "I have been married five years, one child," she said, but her days at home, almost since her wedding-day, had been very few. She was employed by the State, and was at their beck and call whenever needed, moving from one works to another to 'pep up' production that was not high enough.

She was in a rush; she had to collect her suitcase before catching the train, and after she had gone we took another peep into the great engineering shops. The women there—they certainly were magnificent. Some of them were in charge of four machines. They wore blue-grey overalls, and many of them wore little black berets. Their forearms were bare—muscular and strong, as they operated the machines.

The humming background of noise, the clanking and clanging, and the whirl of machines was a perfect setting for these modern Amazons, their faces smiling—very often grinning—but their keen eyes watching the delicate instruments they guarded. They were young Russia—modern Russia, and I could get some of their feeling from them; I could understand why Natasha never even had time to think of her husband and son when there was a job of work to be done. They were all part of a great experiment—an experiment by no means perfect in all its details, but it gave them a great faith, something to live for. You could see that in their smiles, in their

eyes, in the dexterous movements of their fingers. That must be the reason why the Soviets are fighting so well against odds which at first were overwhelming. They are fighting for their experiment, the greatest experiment since Christianity. Whereas in Britain what is the attitude of so many people—we are fighting for what? The Black Market. . . .

Indeed, the biggest difference I noticed between Russian women and British women was in their attitude towards service to their country. On my way to Moscow, Russia was still at peace, but she was at war against anti-progress, and she needed the practical help of every man and woman to bring Communism to its fulfilment. And the women gave willingly. The most important thing in the attitude of Soviet women towards national service was their annoyance and sorrow if they were *not* accepted. If a woman was medically unfit for a national service job—say driving a tractor on the land—she would immediately go out and try to get fit, waiting only for the day when she would be able to land the job, instead of having to sit back and be only a wife.

Now in Britain to-day the woman who is medically unfit for the Services or the munitions works gives a whoop of joy when she breaks the glad news to her friends. Most of the women who do nothing for the war effort have expressions like this, "Oh! I've been very lucky, of course. I have to help my father with secretarial work, so he's got me off."

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Poor Intourist. I had the feeling that he was one of the old stagers like some of the bearded craftsmen we had seen in the steel-works, and that he was not quite certain in his own mind that all this ant-like activity was making Novosibirsk a better place to live in. Mind you, his patter was perfect. His historical note was excellent. But was it, I wondered, a trifle soul-less? Was it like the work of a hack journalist, writing some article he hasn't the faintest interest in, just because he wants a couple of guineas?

I don't quite know why I thought this, except perhaps by odd remarks Intourist let fall now and again—remarks about

the past. We were walking through the Oktiabrskaya Street. It was wide and vigorous and flourishing, and the pavements were crowded with men and women all walking with a steadfast purpose. You could see that they had all just done something and were going home, or else were just off to do something. All of Novosibirsk gave you that impression—busy, thriving, energetic. The streets were quite crowded, and all the men and women were dressed in thick clothes and boots—like Natasha's clothes, not bright, but of good quality.

"You know," said Intourist. "I remember when the horsemen used to come down past here. Nobody in the world ever wore quite such bright clothes. I've gathered wild strawberries where this very street is—this part of the world is famous for its wild strawberries. Or was." He sounded very wistful.

Then, of course, the soul of the propagandist got the upper hand. "And just think what we've done here! This is the centre of Asia. This is the pivot of Russia, or it would be if there ever was a war. We could get enough coal or enough food for the whole world." He looked up at the grey sky, and added with a grin, "And enough snow, too. I shall be glad when the warm weather comes."

The station was crowded when we got back. There were a great many soldiers boarding the train. Intourist jerked the car to a skiddy standstill, and we paid him the twenty roubles, which he tucked into a large pocket before bidding us good-bye. He shook hands with us—"Something else the Americans taught me," he smiled, and we went through the barrier and clambered up the steps.

"I am glad to see you," said Kissling, running up as soon as he caught sight of us. "I am thinking you are completely lost and maybe in gaol!"

We told him we had been for a look round the town. "The English, they don't mind," he shook his head sadly. "But me, no, never."

Back in the train, we took off our coats—it was lovely and

warm inside—and put on our slippers. Helen started to pour out a cup of tea, and I went into Alexandrov's compartment and asked him to come and join us in a drink. As we sat there drinking, the train jerked forward and I went into the corridor to see the station disappear. I could see the broad streets of Novosibirsk—I could see one we had gone down with Intourist—and the factories and the workshops and the chimneys, all the result of so much hard labour against the elements; all part of an industrial and industrious enterprise which started from scratch, which started with nothing more than a handful of willing men and some tools.

It was Alexandrov who unconsciously spoke the voice of Russia. He put his empty tea-cup down on the ledge, and pointed to the smoky chimneys falling behind the train as we moved towards another thousand miles or so of steppe on the way to the Urals.

"It's a nice feeling," he said slowly, "to be part owner of all that."

WOMEN MUST WORK

Chapter 10

THE NIGHT WE LEFT NOVOSIBIRSK behind, as Helen and I sat drinking tea Alexandrov knocked on the door, slid it open, and came in, followed by a woman. It was Natasha—you will remember we had just caught a glimpse of her in a steel-works as she dashed to catch the train.

She looked different now. She had taken off her heavy black coat and hat and her knee-high boots, and was dressed in a blue smock and a dark blue serge skirt. Her stockings were black, but her hair—her hair was corn-coloured, like fair straw, tied in a little knot on the nape of her neck. And her eyes—the first time I saw them, I realized they were black, the blackest eyes I have ever looked into. Like black diamonds. For Natasha was no demure Soviet factory hand, content to play her modest part in the scheme of things, content to do as she was bid. She was a real honest-to-goodness red-hot Communist. More than anything else, when she started to spout, she reminded me of a red-hot Communist in Glasgow! Except that Natasha was actually playing her part in the experiment.

She can't have been much more than five feet. But she packed verbal punches that made us wince, her black eyes went on fire. She was a grand person.

We started slowly, of course, that first night. She spoke fair English: it was nothing like so good as Alexandrov's, but provided that Natasha spoke carefully and slowly, it was understandable. Now and again, carried away by herself, she gabbled off in Russian; then Alexandrov gave us a précis of the juicier bits.

At first I should have said she was about thirty. Helen even said thirty-three. Actually she was twenty-four, and she had already taken a degree in metallurgy. Since the age of

sixteen she had packed in more intelligent study than I shall ever do—and she knew it. As for her attitude towards women's rights—phew! She made our own charming Dr. Edith Summerskill look like a fragile and timid Victorian begging for an extra bit of cake.

"I *cannot* understand your women," she said to Helen. "Sitting about doing nothing. Why live?"

"We have babies—it's quite a useful function," pointed out Helen.

"Pooh!" Natasha dismissed this as a sort of spare-time hobby. "I have one—I haven't seen him for seven months. He is one year old. As soon as I'd had him I packed him off to a State nursery—much better off there. They won't spoil him."

Natasha's father had been a blacksmith in a small town in the Urals—that was where she inherited her love of engineering, she told us—and told us proudly, for she insisted that nobody between Moscow and Krasnoyarsk could forge a better shoe than her father. These Russians love expert craftsmen; that is one of the reasons why they respect the British workman.

"He is still alive," she said, "but he is getting old. The strokes of his hammer are getting slower and slower. We've had blacksmiths in our family for five generations—son after son, but father will be the last. There's no need any more. I can make a much better shoe without any forge. This is the age of machinery." (She spoke the last part rather like a textbook saying; all through her rapid, eager conversation she would suddenly come out with some frightful hackneyed truism; perhaps lack of knowledge of our language was the reason.)

From the age of fourteen Natasha experimented in her father's forge, playing with the hammer, the irons, with the bellows, until her great chance came—she got a job as a shop hand in a tractor factory. She was one of many, but she studied assiduously in her spare time (never tell me the modern Russian can't absorb the printed word!). At eighteen she was a shop foreman, and they packed her off to the Moscow Institute of Metallurgy—all expenses paid. She got

married while studying; graduated from there, and for the past year had been a member of a band of highly trained metallurgists roving from factory to factory as ordered by the People's Commissar of Heavy Industry.

"Don't you miss your husband?" I asked facetiously.

She spoke simply and slowly, "Even if I didn't work I shouldn't see him much—he travels, too, you see. He's an engine-driver."

Now, the way she said that, the way she told us her husband was an engine-driver, opened up more of modern Russia to me—modern Soviet Russia—than anything anybody had ever said to me. The way she said it meant this. "My husband is an engine-driver! I don't suppose he'll ever be anything else but an engine-driver, and I hope not, for we both consider that engine-driving is an absolutely vital part of the life of the Soviet Union. If there weren't engine-drivers there could be no real communication, and then, either in peace or war, what would happen to us? Therefore, man for man, my husband is probably as important as anybody in the Soviet Union."

But if an Englishwoman had spoken—particularly one from that odd stratum, the upper middle class—what would that Englishwoman have said? "Yes, my husband's *actually* driving a train! He's doing it for experience, you know. He feels he ought to know every department before he joins the Board. . . ."

Maybe that's not quite fair, but you know what I mean. I laughed like hell when Natasha looked Helen up and down like a filly—Helen is tall and slim and rather elegant, with long fingers and nails like filberts—and said, "You know, Mrs English, you'd make an excellent fireman for a train. You're just the right build!"

Quick as lightning, Helen replied, "There's so many men out of work in Britain. Otherwise . . ."

Natasha shook her head sadly. "Women in Britain," she said. "I despair of them. We've got four thousand women engine-drivers on our railways in Russia. They drive much better than the men—except my husband." Her black eyes twinkled for a second as she said that.

"What I can't understand," she said, as I poured her out another glass of tea, "is that once you *do* settle down to make a living for yourself, you get so much out of it, as well as give so much. But forget all the Communist feeling of what you *give*. Think of what you get if—when you get married—you carry on in a factory working at a machine."

"I don't see that you get anything," said Helen. "If I worked at a machine in a factory I'd just go there in the morning, and I'd come back dead tired at night. I'd probably earn just enough to pay for a woman to clean up our flat. So where should I be?"

"While I worked in a factory," began Natasha, "and when I was only an ordinary workman, I learned to fly. In my spare time—without costing me a penny—I learned to pilot a plane. Our factory had three trainer models. We get them under an organization called Osoaviakhim. It provides everything for pleasure and fitness," (She didn't say so, but most of the pleasure pursuits were directed to possible war, such as rifle-shooting, parachuting, A.R.P., etc.) "I learned to fly in six months, and then I told my instructor that I wanted to fly faster machines. So when my holidays came—you know of course that manual workers get longer holidays than brain workers?—off I went to an advanced course. I actually flew Soviet war machines. And all for nothing!"

"Don't you have to do *anything* for it?" I asked.

"Very little. We have to learn a few elementary defence measures—simple things like how to use a gas-mask, how to carry a rifle if you're a man, first aid; then after that you can choose what you want. My greatest friend became a parachutist. She started by jumping off towers—we've got thousands of parachute towers all over the country—and then began to jump from real planes. It's marvellous fun. The men can learn cavalry work, in the winter they get special courses in ski-ing. And if there ever is a war . . . well, I'll be ready. I can still be a trained engineer if I'm needed, or else, if we get short of men I can be a transport pilot. Already a lot of women are in the Red Air Force acting as transport pilots—but that's a bit dull after the first week."

She pushed her empty glass on a corner of our minute table and lit a cardboard cigarette. "I wish I could go to London," she said, "and organize a Soviet there." Then she added something which is profoundly true, "All the women who make their mark in England are backed by money. That seems an awful pity. I know why. The men will only let the women have a few big jobs—just to keep them quiet. So the women with money—the women with influence—they keep quiet about it. There's no chance in England to-day for the miner's wife, for the dustman's wife, for—what Britain calls so patronizingly the working classes. And they are the ones"—she slapped her knee once for every word she spoke—"they are the ones who count."

I forget all she said. We talked far into that night. Some of her theories, her arguments, were wild and wrong, I felt. I don't know—I may be wrong—but I cannot for the life of me see any romance in doing the same job hour after hour, day after day, if it involves only a small movement or series of movements on a mass-production belt in a great factory. That can never be romance; it can only be boredom. And even the thrill of free flying lessons after office hours wouldn't tempt me to take it on. Would it most British women? I don't think so. Is it less boring than cooking and cleaning and washing up? I asked Helen, but from her I couldn't expect a fair answer, for we had only been married in the tropics a month or so before we made our way to Shanghai, so she had no experience. But I think (the war apart, when women must do something) that in some ways women prefer their home existence, however unpleasant the drudgery. They are at least their own masters.

Mind you, I could see what Natasha was driving at. Russia, even in 1939, was still in the throes of the great experiment, and every nut that Natasha tightened was making more solid the edifice that was being built on the spirit of them all. If you can only work yourselves up to that idealistic viewpoint, then there you have real basis of enthusiasm. And Natasha—plus the other Russians I met—realized absolutely that they could never attain the ideal unless they sacrificed

for it. And, of course, they were willing to do that. I suspect that Natasha missed her little boy very much, and her engine-driver husband. But her feeling was—well, the Soviet wants me here. This is where I can do the best job. Nothing else—for the moment—matters; it'll probably be much better for junior.

Which of course it will be. And there is, equally, no doubt that you cannot get British women to think like that. Now, when there is a war on, you cannot get the majority of British women to *want* to sacrifice for the ultimate good. Nine out of ten are only concerned with their exemptions. Never in history have there been uniforms which people were less proud to wear than those of the British women's services. Let that be said to their lasting disgrace. And to Russia's credit, you could see pride shining through the uniform of overalls that adorned women like Natasha at their lathes and in their workshops.

Of course, there is one big point which Natasha made. "Women in Soviet Russia are men's equals," she said. "No nonsense about it—not sometimes. Always. Complete equals in every aspect. My case isn't peculiar—very often in Russia the woman earns more than the men. I do. I just happen to be working at a job which the State pays better. If we both worked at the same job then we'd both earn exactly the same wages. When my husband was called up for his term of military service I didn't get any allowances. If I'd had my baby then I'd have got an allowance for him, but I got none for my husband. I can work, can't I? That's good enough for the State. If there's ever a war, you know, the women of Russia will take right over. There'll be no allowances for them like the British wives got in the Great War—none. Because the women will have to run everything.

"In my flat in Moscow we've already got all our air-raid plans ready—women are the chief stewards to deal with bombs and gas; all so that the men who are doing national work can sleep as much as possible."

I suppose the participation of women in the industrial life of Soviet Russia dates from the first of the Five Year Plans—

that would be in 1928. Since then, of course, their numbers have continually swollen. Actually, I have seen figures showing the numbers of women—or rather, the percentages—in industry. Natasha herself told me that one out of every four in the coal-mining industry is a woman; one out of five in railway transport, one out of five in heavy metallurgical industry. Figures supplementing this show that nearly half the people in the printing industry are women, that more than half the doctors are women, that a fifth of the accountants are women, that one in three economists are women.

"We've got more than eleven million women workers in the Soviet Union," said Natasha, "and many of them are doing jobs which demand extremely high qualifications—women such as locksmiths, cutting machinists, precision tool-workers. I told you about our four thousand women engine-drivers—well, we've got forty thousand women *in charge* of communal stock farms and a hundred thousand tractor-drivers on the land. Actually, we've got nearly twenty million women workers on collective farms."

Yes, Natasha should come to London. Only she would probably shoot those women who didn't do just as she wanted.

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Oddly enough, back in London some months later I was having lunch at the Savoy with that distinguished and brilliant cartoonist Leslie Illingworth, of the *Daily Mail*.

"I've brought along a red-hot Communist for you, Noel," he said. "I want you to meet her. She has the real feeling."

Her name was Nella and, believe it or not, she was the spit image of Natasha except that her hair was a raven black. I almost gasped with the shock. She ate her way through the meal, discussed Communism with me, then took a disdainful look around at the pot-bellies, and remarked:

"Well, you know, Leslie—I'm very grateful to you for bringing me to a place like this. Thanks very much—but really, you can keep it. I'd just as soon have Joe Lyons."

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She was a grand person, Natasha. We both liked her very much, and she often came in to see us on the evenings as the train was speeding towards Moscow—towards the end of our journey and Mr Natasha. Funny, she never told me his name. She 'lived' right at the other end of the train, so it meant quite a long journey through swaying coaches for her to come—I like to think now that she thought it was worth the trouble for her to come to see us. I wonder what she is doing now? Only three years ago since she was jogging along on the train with us, but what a lot she might have done since then for the brave new corner of the world of which she was so proud.

She hated Kissling.

"Too fat!" she snorted the first time he came wandering along to our cabin. "He eyes me like a cow! There was one good thing about the Tsars—if you were on the right side. You could send people like that to the salt-mines!"

I guess if there's excitement in Russia Natasha will be there, if only to see that the women guerrillas get their rights!

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One evening I asked Natasha if, as she travelled round the industrial regions of Soviet Russia, she noticed much disparity in the types of factories, and if some were still backward in social amenities—those amenities which mean so much to the Soviet worker of to-day simply because they are part of his wages. She admitted that some were not as good as others, and that on the whole the workshops employing a large percentage of women were better than those which employed few women—doubtless, she explained, because the women saw that things got done. But most of them had, as an absolute minimum, facilities for summer and winter sports, and facilities for studying. Always for studying—and women made as much use of the free libraries as did the men.

Both Natasha and a number of men to whom we spoke said that in the event of war women would be able to take over, more or less completely, the whole fabric of the modern industry of Russia. One of them actually said—and this was

a man—that the next war Russia would fight was being won at the moment we were passing through Siberia; because as we passed through, women had advanced to such a degree that they could, if war came, supervise all the industrial plants, become directors of the factories, so that men could be called up *instantly* for active service.

Even in one or two factories in 1939 women were more or less in charge, operating complete assembly belts for tractor machines, while on the Trans-Siberian we repeatedly saw scores of women doing every different kind of job. There was one woman guard on the train for three or four days—we only caught a glimpse of her squatting in her guard's compartment at the end of a coach. But we saw many Soviet women plate-layers, and once, indeed, we saw a gang of women clearing up debris for a new short line extension. A big, tough figure of a woman, dressed in a sheepskin coat, bright yellow ochre, was shouting directions to the women. I wondered what they earned, but nobody told me. They deserved very high wages—it was a perishing job, cutting away ground in that Siberian winter—and, incidentally, it was, I think, the only time on the whole trip that I saw ground that was not covered with snow: just a few square yards of it, nearly black with richness.

I'll tell you a funny thing about women in Russia—I never found or met one of the book-keeping or clerking class. All that I saw seemed to work in the higher professions or in factory or in field. I don't think they really liked humdrum office work though neither for that matter do English women, I suppose. Not many shorthand typists like their jobs well enough to make a career of them in this country. I can't say I blame them, because there is a wretched tendency, once a girl in England becomes a stenographer, to make her stay one, and all ambition is stifled. I know that applies to many commercial houses, and it also applies to journalism—for a girl in the secretarial department of a big newspaper to try to branch out as a reporter is nearly always hopeless.

Still, somebody in Russia must be doing clerical work. Who? Nobody seemed quite to know.

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"Shall I tell you one thing that women have done in Russian factories?" asked Natasha. "They have made them clean. There is no need, just because you are in a workshop, to keep the place dirty. In most of the factories where I have been working the women have organized cleaning squads. Every morning and afternoon they clean the floors—sweep them up—and generally see that the place is kept looking as nice as they would like their homes to look."

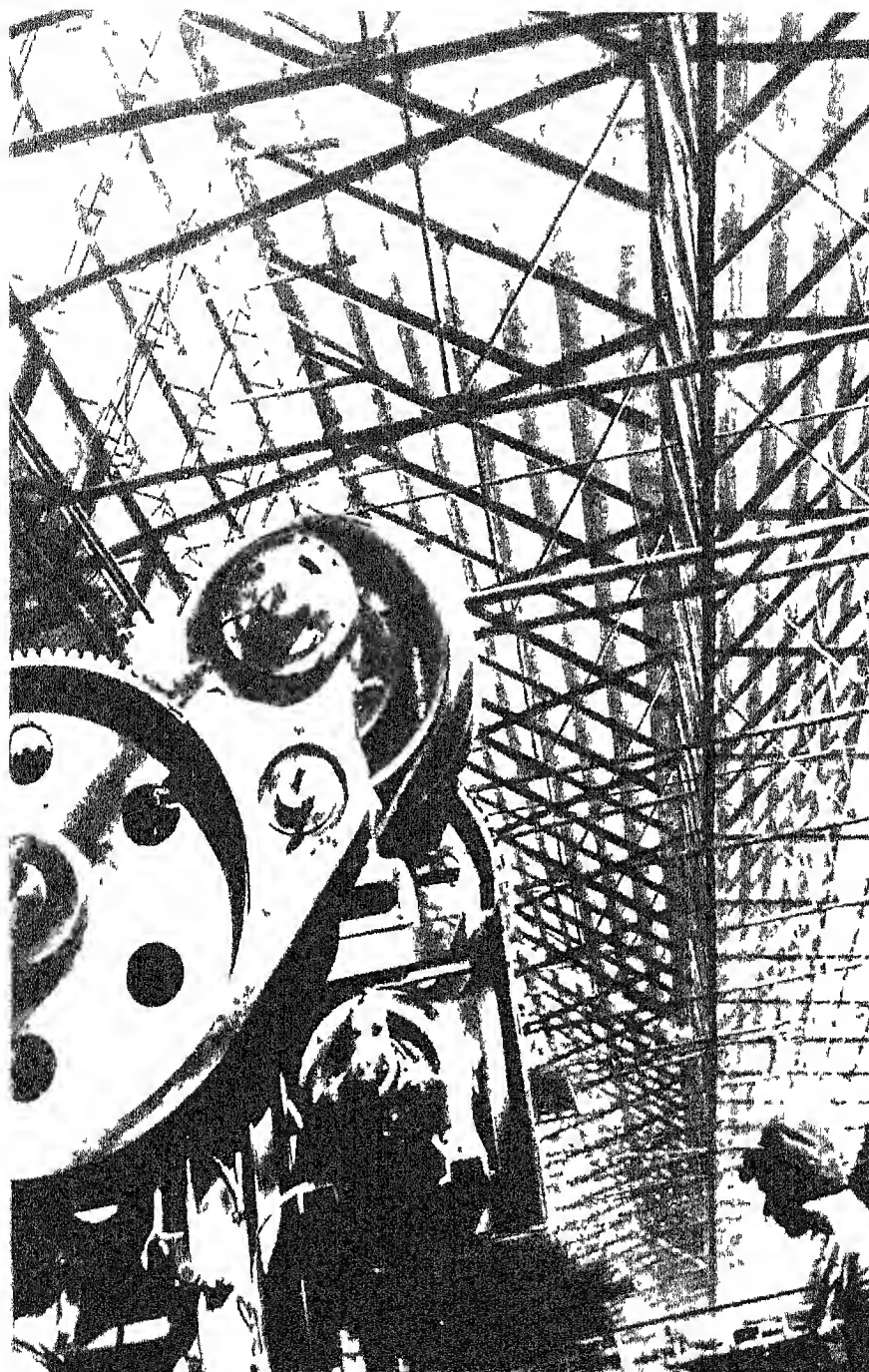
Women were responsible, I was told, for painting factory machines—I had noticed in the Novosibirsk factory that many of the machines were brightly painted. They were often behind the famous Soviet wall newspapers—some of these wall newspapers were quite large, stuck up on the factory walls, so that the workers had a free digest of the day's news.

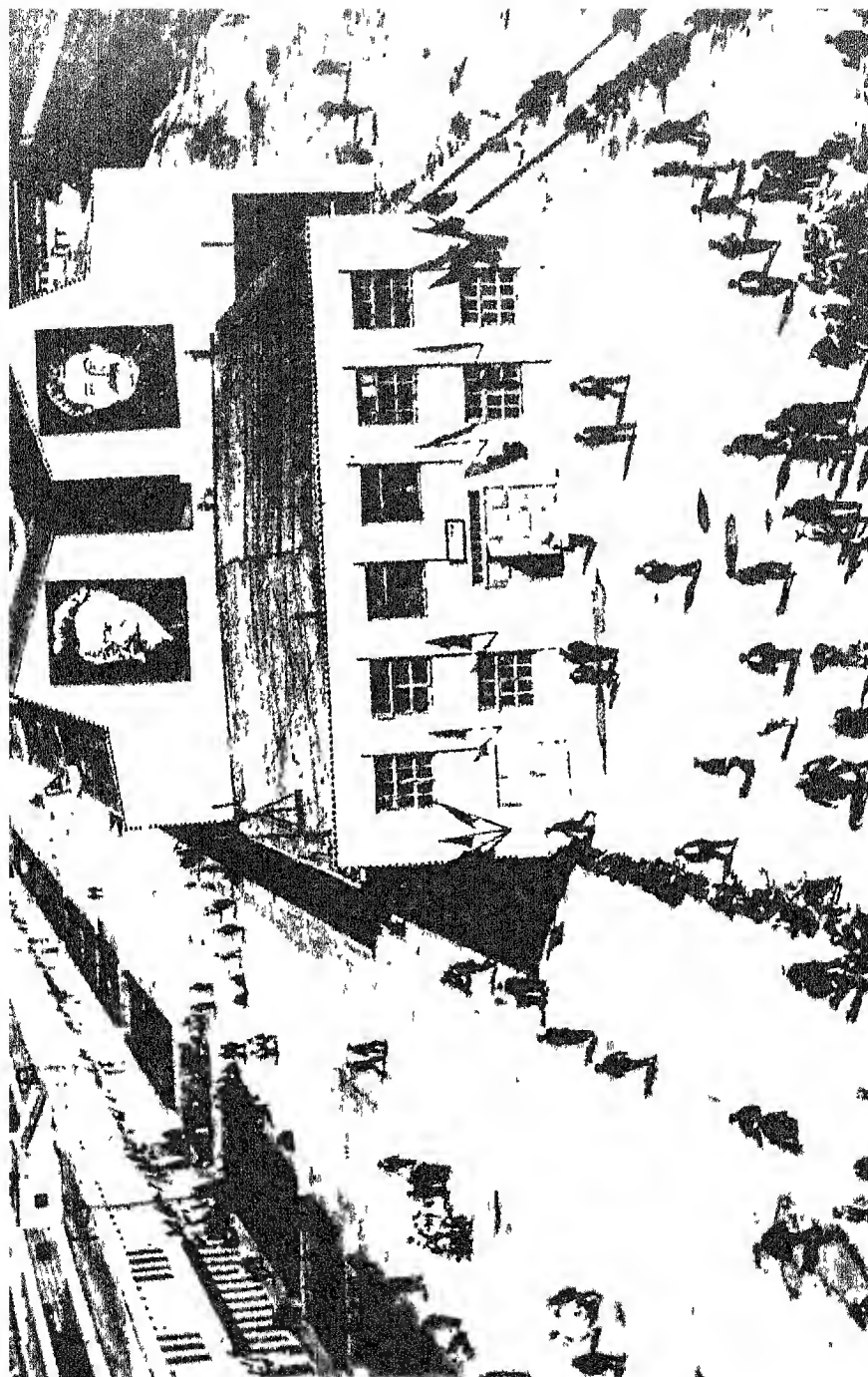
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Yes, she was a grand girl, Natasha. Excitingly violent in all she did (abusive if necessary!) and terrifically ambitious. I don't think she was typical of all Soviet women—there are still quite a number of drudges, who work only because their husbands don't earn enough on their own—but Natasha was an example of the best type, of the type that really lives and breathes Soviet Russia from dawn to dusk. And she was so proud—so proud of her engine-driver husband. I think I liked that best of all.

NOVOSIBIRSK

Tractor plant now making tanks and the glass roof
is out of reach of Goering's bombers.





HOUSEHOLD ACCOUNTS

Chapter II

THE TRAIN WAS MARCHING ON. The day after leaving Novosibirsk we came into the station of Omsk, well on our way to the Urals, which stretch and split the continent of Russia into two, which divide Europe from Asia; the backbone of the Soviet State. And all of us—Helen, myself, Kissling—we were all beginning to dread the end of the journey. Funny, how people get along, how you get settled down. Many's the time I have been sorry to say good-bye to a ship, but there *is* something feminine and essentially personal about a ship: the splitting of a ship's family after a long voyage is always a sorrowful occasion—but nobody could say that the Trans-Siberian really had a soul. And yet—well, there it was. We were only a couple of days from Moscow, and the prospect of saying good-bye wasn't at all pleasant. The prospect of a hot bath and some clean clothes was, but that's a different story.

We only had a short time at Omsk, a town that was rather a queer mixture, because it has not grown with anything like the rapidity of towns like Novosibirsk—it was half agricultural, half industrial, with the main hotel about four miles from the station, so I was told. It looked very busy, but even from the train windows we could see that it appeared to lack the big wide roads and modern buildings of Novosibirsk. The streets were cobbled—you could see the brick-like appearance underneath the thin coating of snow—and even the station was a forlorn business. The city seemed to stretch for miles; as, indeed, most Soviet cities do now that they have circumnavigated the bugbear of private ownership and all land, belonging to the State, is reasonable in price. But we didn't see much of it, so

I can't really pass judgment on the place, but it looked a little disappointing after some we saw.

CHELYABINSK
End of the day's work at a
modern arms factory.

It was at Omsk that Kissling managed to get, at the prohibitive price of four roubles each—nearly four shillings each to him!—half a dozen oranges for Hansen. How the little German must have welcomed them. I really began to wonder if he would live until we reached Moscow, but if any suggestion of medical aid was made to him, or if any of us tried to get the porter to look after him, he nearly went crazy. Of course, I hadn't realized it at first, but he just loathed everything Russian, everything Communist—he hated it with everything in his body, and was only travelling on the route, of course, because his fare had been paid that way and was much cheaper for his bosses in China.

We went out with Kissling to buy the oranges—not that we wanted to buy anything, and if we had done it was too expensive. But at many of the stations, next to the hot-water taps, there were small kiosks selling odd articles—food, or else clothes or souvenirs; but they were at wretched prices, quite beyond our reach, and the only things we should like to have bought were small soap-stone figures beautifully carved by Russians—but they were anything from a pound sterling upward. They just weren't worth it.

Yet, despite the high prices, these little shops on the stations—I am talking not only of Omsk, but particularly of smaller wayside stations as well—these little shops were always popular, and there were usually queues outside—queues of people each with a box, buying mostly food for the journey—for, of course, there were hundreds of people on the long journey of the Trans-Siberian who, like the nuns, never even saw the inside of the restaurant-car. For them, bread and cold meats had to be bought at the stations. That was all a lot of them ate for the whole journey. The stuff didn't look bad, though it wasn't conspicuous for its cleanliness.

It was at one station near Omsk that we saw a rather fascinating scene. When the train stopped and we got out to stretch our legs—Kissling with his ridiculous two hats on—we noticed immediately a huge hubbub in the one small stone building in the centre of the double platform. We had a look inside—and the sight was worth seeing, for the whole

of the bare room was bright red with flags and signs. Instead of the usual bare walls, sadly in need of a coat of paint, there were big pictures of Stalin and Lenin, huge red flags on each wall, smaller red flags on the tables, chairs, over the doors, on the counter, and stuck up on small poles in the four corners of the room.

In the centre of an admiring crowd, looking very happy and excited, and quite unphlegmatic, was a bonny girl of about twenty-five or so, obviously waiting for the train. Everybody was making a fuss of her—and there was a great deal of vodka-drinking and laughing and shouting. I found out afterwards that she had been awarded a high Soviet medal for work in an electrical factory near by—she had found a new method of doing a certain job, thereby reducing the man-hours—or woman-hours—spent on the work. Now, as well as a medal, she had been sent by her factory to study in Moscow. She was the village heroine. I saw her later, in the corridor of a hard-class coach, munching a piece of black bread contentedly.

"What an example of Soviet womanhood," said Natasha (triumphantly!) when we were talking about her. "Yes, she's married, and her husband's getting good money. There's no need for her to work."

But, as Natasha pointed out, if she didn't work, what was there for her to do? The answer, of course, is—nothing. The more I thought about it, the more I came to the conclusion that the shrewdest move by the Soviet Government in gathering the help of the women of the country was the almost total abolition of the home as we know it. In place of a semi-detached mod. con. h and c house, Russia has substituted a couple of rooms and a bathroom and kitchen that must be shared. What can a woman do at home all day? Nothing. Instead, she goes to a factory, whether she needs the money or not, and is thus allowed to join the factory club, take part in its social organization with her husband. "Much better than sticking at home like English girls," said Natasha.

Of course her views were often a bit queer. When you came to study her she really had the most astonishing opinions, particularly about international affairs and foreign countries.

I think, on reflection, that the two points which struck me most forcibly about Russia were the naïve pride of the Soviets in their work, and their hopes of the future ("I know everything isn't perfect now, but Rome wasn't built in a day," etc.) and the astonishing conceptions they had of life abroad.

Natasha really did think that the women were being kept in ignorance and darkness in this country in pretty much the same way as the women of Eastern countries. She thought, too, that the London police spent most of their time quelling riots and disturbances made by the huge mass of unemployed. She had all sorts of half-truths, dangerous little knowledge that got her completely on the wrong track. And when I told her that the women of England really did prefer scrubbing their own floors—*their own floors*—and cooking over their own gas-stoves—*their own gas-stoves*—to working in factories I could see that she didn't wish to be impolite, so was just disbelieving me and saying nothing. How I wish that Russia and Britain could exchange a million people a year to study each other's country.

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"Personally, for my concern," said Kissling definitely, "I am liking the countries where a man can have so many wives as he likes and noddings spoken or asked."

He would.

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Yes, Hansen was getting very bad. Helen, being a kindly soul, looked after him as much as she could, and he got a goodly portion of our precious tinned fruit every day—the way he lapped it up, particularly the pineapple juice, showed how much he needed it. And he drank gallons of thin weak tea, always, of course, without milk, often without sugar or lemon as supplies became scarce.

The nuns were kind to him too. The old one who had the kind smile often went to his bunk to help him, and often I was called in to act as interpreter. We would talk in pidgin Swedish, and I would then translate into English for the benefit of the German—a roundabout method, but it worked.

I hadn't seen much of the young nun in three or four days—odd glimpses, yes, when I visited the nuns, in their compartment, often with Kissling, but nothing alone, and yet the funny thing was that I felt instinctively that I should. You know how you sometimes feel about a person—that he or she is trying to tell you something, trying to get something across. I sensed—and I was so sure that I told Helen—that Sister Rigmor was hesitating and wondering whether she could pluck up courage to grab me in a corner alone if she could get away and confide in me.

Helen only laughed . . . until the day when Sister Rigmor *did* confide in me. And then—what a meeting! Phew! It all happened so suddenly, and was over so quickly, that I had to shake my head to realize that it really had happened.

I was walking through the corridor one morning looking at the thick snow outside—thicker and thicker it was getting, as the ice-snow gave way to a warmer carpet of white, and the weather became much milder. Suddenly there she was, barring my way. Out of the folds of her black cloak came a small hand as she stopped me going any farther.

I forget the actual words she used. Anyway, her Swedish was so difficult to understand that I couldn't take it all in word for word. But the the gist of it was this. She wanted some money.

I suppose I gaped at her.

"They made me go in the convent two years ago," she said breathlessly. "I didn't want to go. I was in love with somebody, and he left me—without marrying me when he should have done. So afterwards they persuaded me to go into a convent. I didn't want to, I swear I didn't. I hate it all. And they sent me to China. And there——"

She hesitated and looked very forlorn. Her cheeks were pink, but she didn't feel as embarrassed as I did.

"So now you're coming back," I said.

"Yes." The eagerness in her voice was pathetic. "Something happened out in China, and they're sending me back to the convent in Sweden. I don't want to go. If you could spare me a little money—just a few kroner—I might manage

to get away when we get back to Sweden. But I *must* have money to get clothes. I can never get away if I don't have any money. They'll never let me go. Never."

I dug my hand in my pocket. We were desperately hard up, but we certainly hadn't spent much on the train, whereas we had bargained on spending a pound or two. I had six American dollars. Thirty shillings—well, if that would buy her freedom, why not?

I held them out to her, and I could see tears in her eyes. The Russians, lolling up as usual against the corridor windows, were quite oblivious to the little scene. She bent down quickly and kissed my hand and—habit, I suppose—made a sign.

"*Tak*," she said softly. "*Mange tak*."

Then she turned and walked swiftly along the corridor, while I stood scratching my head and puzzling about the one mysterious sentence she had spoken . . . "*something happened out in China. . .*"

What? I never found out.

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Yes, these strange days on the longest train journey in the world were flowing fast, and we seemed to crowd so much into them that time was at a discount. The nearer we got to Moscow, the longer we stayed up at night. At first we had been content to go to bed at midnight; then, as we met more friends, and we started to argue more and more, midnight became one o'clock in the morning. One night it was actually three in the morning before we got to bed.

Sleepily I asked Alexandrov what day it was.

"I do not know," he said. "In another ten years nobody will ever remember the days in Russia. Even now we go by dates instead."

A very good idea, really. Throughout Russia and Siberia there is a six-day week, with five days of work and one of rest. Because of this, the old seven days of the week are more or less meaningless. Gradually they are being discarded, even though they still appear on newspapers. But you never

hear people talk about a Friday or a Monday. Always the date.

It was that late night that we saw suddenly in a station siding a great Soviet armoured train.

In its way it was one of the most impressive things I had seen for a long time. It was in three parts—two armoured coaches, bristling with guns, and an armoured engine in the middle. We looked at it for about ten minutes or quarter of an hour. One of the coaches had a heavy gun peeping through an armoured side, and the other had a battery of four machine-guns pointed upward. Skilfully resting on the armoured platforms were rail sections and half a dozen steel sleepers—obviously there to mend torn-up tracks.

I asked Alexandrov if he really thought an armoured train could be of much value in modern warfare—it seemed to me that a track was far too vulnerable these days, and that one well-placed bomb could immobilize such a train simply by stopping it from going forward to the battle line.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I think they can be useful," he said. "Particularly in winter. You have seen the sort of country we have been travelling through. Roads blocked up—in some parts no roads at all. Then the armoured train comes into its own, I think. It has drawbacks, of course—it can be made stationary very quickly, but our shock workers on armoured trains can mend bomb-smashed railways very quickly."

I was still sceptical, but since I got back armoured trains seem to have done some excellent work in the defence of Leningrad—notice, in *defence*. That, I think, is probably their primary function. They have been moving round and round Leningrad, mounting very heavy guns at a time when it would have been quite impossible, because of the weather, to move heavy guns by road.

Of course, the Russians were really the originators of modern armoured trains in the civil war. I believe there was one classic case in the civil war when two armoured trains actually met in battle on the Trans-Siberian track. Each side scored a direct hit on the other train, and the result was declared a draw.

Many of those early armoured trains were improvised affairs, because in the times of the Revolution the roads were in an appalling condition in Russia—they are not too good now, but they are all A.1 compared with what they were twenty-five years ago. The Russians simply mounted cannon and machine-guns on ordinary goods trucks, because they could not transport them over the roads. They made some attempt with steel plate to armour the trains and give some protection to the gun crew, but it was not very much.

But the train that I saw that night was very different. Here was a scientifically constructed instrument of war, specially built to get over the problem of winter communications, when railways are often the only means of transport left open. Yes, it was very impressive.

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On the way to the Urals I met an old and rather pleasant man called Anton. I wasn't sure of his age, but he looked a near sixty. I was playing chess with a Red soldier one afternoon, Alexandrov looking on idly, when he was joined by this man, whom I had not seen before. He was dressed in a European suit, and had a collar and tie, a snub nose, and about two days' bristle on his chin. As we played he talked softly to Alexandrov, with an odd inquisitive squint or two at Helen in the corner, and when the Soviet soldier had beaten me Alexandrov said laconically:

"He wants to play you."

So we sat down and played. Alexandrov introduced us, and we smiled and nodded to each other, and when we had finished he had a cup of tea with us, and then insisted, through Alexandrov, that we should go through the train to meet his wife. She was three or four coaches away, and the four of us pushed our way through the corridors crowded with Russians leaning against the windows listening to the radio.

His wife's name was Saratova—a lovely name, particularly when spoken by a Russian, for they can roll it round the tongue much better than we can. She was a bit flummoxed when we all walked into the hard-class compartment where

they had two bunks, but she smiled cheerfully and started to gabble to her husband. She too was getting on—nice and stout, with coal-black hair and a perpetual smile.

Talking to them through an interpreter was a long job; a difficult job and tiring. There were so many false starts and loose strings at the end; and yet, from these two old people, who had started life in a Siberian village, had seen the sway and domination of a local overlord, who had seen the change and social revolution of an amazing twenty-five years, I learned much.

I cannot possibly give you the conversations we had on the occasions we met; as I say, they were too complicated. But out of them all there emerged a story—the story of a family in Soviet Russia to-day.

Anton had been brought up in a Siberian village. The nearest school was seven miles away, but he had gone there—walking the fourteen miles each day in summer, missing many a day through weather problems in the long winter. And anyway, at the age of eight, when he had barely learned to read and write, his schooling ended. He started to work. And since the day they were married, he and Saratova had both worked until recently when she stopped after their fourth child was born—he was still under three. Two of the four children—three boys, one girl—were working; one of the two elder sons married, the other single. And by probing and prying (and making a nuisance of myself) I found out a little of how they lived.

Anton had now a very good job in his factory—he was an overseer and earned seven hundred roubles a month; a very good wage. His wife, of course, was earning nothing, but the second son, Sasha, who worked in the same factory as his father, earned 270 roubles a month—also quite good—and it meant that the family was getting about a thousand roubles a month to keep mother, father, and three children.

“Is it enough?” I asked them through Alexandrov.

They both laughed. More than enough. They lived in a modern flat of three rooms in Novosibirsk, for which they paid thirty roubles a month—a fantastically low rent, judged

either by English standards or as a percentage of their combined earnings. Only one room was a living-room—they had that and two bedrooms. And somehow I got some sort of a picture of that living-room, with its radio, its pictures of Stalin and Lenin (of course! They are as ubiquitous as the pictures of Hitler in almost every German home), and the rough brightly coloured mats with fringes lying on the plain stained floor. They had an oblong table which they could push to the side of the room after they had had their meals, three arm-chairs, together with a number of cane chairs. They shared a kitchen and a bathroom with another family.

I tried to find out what sort of food they ate, and how much it cost them, what their clothes cost them too. It wasn't easy, because they were quite unable to give me detailed figures for a whole week or a month. So we had to start from a simpler basis.

What did they have to eat yesterday?

Anton had his usual factory canteen lunch—that cost him four roubles. For that he ate some pea soup, shashlik with rice and red cabbage, and fruit pudding. That same meal would have cost us ten roubles at least—probably more—on the train. For dinner the same evening, the three older people had borsch to start with—they couldn't give me a price for that because Saratova had made it out of odds and ends. She took the cream off the milk to pour into it—milk at a rouble and twenty kopeks a pint (hundred kopeks to the rouble).

After the soup they had cod with vegetables. The cod cost a rouble a pound—not very expensive. Baby had his favourite dish—an egg beaten up in milk, with eggs at two for the rouble. As a treat they had melon afterwards—not very expensive, though, as they said, if they had had oranges they would have cost three or four roubles each. They also had some caviar—red caviar which works out at about a rouble a pound, whereas the black sturgeon caviar is twenty times the price—quite prohibitive for the working man. They seemed to think that their food at home, including a midday snack for Saratova and the child, and a small breakfast, would cost a minimum of six roubles a day—to which you

had to add another eight for the two canteen meals of Anton and Sasha.

Here at last was some indication of the value of the rouble, because if you multiply those roubles by thirty, you get 420 roubles a month spent on food, presuming that they never went out for a meal. That seems a fairly high proportion out of a combined double salary of a thousand roubles a month. And other prices which they mentioned to me—such as sardines at five roubles a tin, potatoes at twenty kopeks a pound, and bread at a rouble and a half a loaf—seemed to fit into the same standard.

Then we went on to clothes. What did Anton's suit cost him? The answer was 300 roubles. By our standards (admittedly quite wrong, but you couldn't help translating currency into pounds, shillings, and pence) that came to £15—an enormous price for a suit which was not as good, though thicker, than any suit from a London mass-production ready-made tailor with chromium-plated fittings to his windows. His shoes cost him 140 roubles, his shirt was 22 roubles. Here were big prices—big prices indeed. And what is more important, a big *percentage*—it cost Anton nearly half a month's salary to get an indifferent suit. He was a high wage earner, whereas a man in this country earning, say, £5 a week could buy a better suit for £2 10s.—an eighth of his month's earnings. There you have a big difference. The same applied to shirts and shoes. Though the prices of food seemed comparatively reasonable, prices of clothes were very high.

Mind you, as Anton said, they seemed to get along very happily—doubtless all the extras helped to make that so. In their block of flats they had a big co-operative store, a club, a theatre, and a hairdressing shop. These were cheap. At the factory Anton had the free use of a large library, swimming-pool in the summer, holidays in the summer too—the year before he had won a free holiday in the Caucasus for extra work he had put in at the factory.

Anton's rent was an interesting point, because in one way he owned his own apartment. The block of flats was put up for the workers by the factory authorities who got a long-term

loan from the Government to erect the building. The workers formed a committee to ask the Government for the money, and it was lent on condition that the workers helped to pay it back. This they were doing in the form of rent—it was really like a building society. If Anton had wanted he could have rented his room out, just as though it were his own—but, of course, he was not allowed to rent it out for thirty-one roubles a month! That would have been profiteering.

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“You are very persistent,” said Alexandrov when I asked him to take us back to Anton’s compartment, and do some more interpreting. “What do you want to learn now?”

I wanted to learn what I could about the one member of the family we hadn’t heard about—the married son, whose name was Vanka, and who was at a university.

“He’s rather old for learning,” said Anton, “but in the early days when he came we hadn’t got much money, and we couldn’t do anything but send him out to work.”

Vanka’s wife worked in a Moscow factory and earned 300 roubles a month, while her husband got a Government grant of 200 roubles a month while studying. He was twenty-seven, she was twenty-two—very young to be holding down 300 roubles a month. They had a baby about the same age as Vanka’s brother—about the same age as Vanka’s mother’s son, complicated though it may sound.

Vanka had been sent to the university by his union after working in a Moscow factory for bigger wages. His wife took evening classes at the same university—they were both going to school while their son was not. As well as his Government grant, Vanka earned spare money in his holidays and when he went on special courses in factories where he had to do practical work.

“Their favourite hobby,” said Anton, “is bicycling. They’ve got a bicycle each, and they use them every day.”

And yet in Moscow I saw bicycles priced at four hundred roubles each. Getting on for a month’s combined wages. Impossible. . . .

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"They're lucky those two," said Saratova. "They can both study. My late children have meant that I've had to give all that sort of thing up. I don't suppose I'd have been very good, but I should have liked to learn a bit."

"Not for me," Anton shook his head. "I've worked hard all my life. I can read a book and a newspaper, and that's all I want. I'm all for learning, but you can have too much of a good thing."

There's something in that.

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Saratova was very interesting about her children, for there was a big gap between the two working boys and the two youngsters. That, apparently, was due to financial conditions. Now that Anton had got a better job and during the past ten years had been earning more, they had—to use Alexandrov's phrase—"started again."

When the last child was born Saratova went into a free clinic, and the Government paid her a handsome sum—I couldn't get the exact figure, but I think it was a thousand roubles a year. For the third child she got eight weeks off from her factory on full pay, and then free treatment.

"At our factory," she said, "more than half of the twelve thousand workers were women, and nearly two thousand of them had children in one year—the year my daughter was born. You've no idea the fuss they made of us—far more than of the ordinary women."

At her factory there was a proper crèche, where arrangements were made, and time given off, for feeding the baby. Saratova was able to get milk at a reasonably cheap rate, and there were specially quoted rates for holidays at a factory rest-house forty or fifty miles from Novosibirsk, where in the summer, she went and spent her time walking through the lovely countryside (hard to believe it could be lovely, it was so cold!) and eating and sleeping.

If you have six children, they told me, the State pays the mother two thousand roubles a year for five years after the birth of the last one. They quoted me an instance of a friend

of theirs who had twelve children—in one year alone she got eighteen thousand roubles from the State; more than the combined wages of Anton and his single son Sasha.

"But we shan't have any more," said Anton; "like learning, you can have too much of a good thing."

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Like every man and woman from the age of fifteen, Anton carried his passport with him. So did Saratova. So, for that matter, did Natasha. So did every Russian, and it is an astonishing thing how the movements of any man in Soviet Russia to-day can be followed and traced by the police in just the same way as an alien's can in Britain. I gathered from Anton that there was no need for him to register in Moscow, because he was just going for a holiday, but if he had been going to a new job there he would certainly have had to do so.

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As we gradually approached the Urals the scenes and the people were changing. Most noticeable of all, I think, there were more suits—suits as we wear them, as opposed to smocks and blue woollen trousers. There seemed to be fewer soldiers too—not on the train, for it was jammed with Soviet soldiers who were making the through trip like Alexandrov—but in the streets of the villages and towns. The people seemed to be better dressed, and the explanation put forward was that the Urals, and a belt of land stretching for many miles into Asia, were working to capacity, that all men and women were working overtime, and all were earning good money. That may have been true; I don't know. It was almost certainly true of the big cities, for they appeared to be very busy, but a village near the Urals was just a village—and in the snow a pretty desolate and forlorn spot in the wilderness. There were certainly fewer beggars—or perhaps they were not beggars so much as nomads, though at many stations all along the line we had seen bundles of humanity wrapped in filthy rags, lying on the platforms, or in cold waiting-rooms. Who they were, why they should be so poverty-stricken, we never found out

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—everybody always assured us that there was work and enough to spare: that the only trouble was a shortage of labour to force the experiment of Communism onward at a quicker pace.

But those bundles of rags were only odd mysteries—and there were plenty of them in those five thousand miles, of which not so many were left as we rattled along towards *Russia's spinal column, and the last lap to Moscow.*

"The trouble with you foreigners," said Alexandrov, quite without malice, "is that you're never content with what you *see*. You can see for yourself great factories, wonderful farms, a good army—look at the money our soldiers have to spend—and yet you're always asking questions. Isn't the picture enough proof?"

"Mebbe," I reflected, as he walked away. It was certainly proof of much valiant work in a country desolate and denuded when the Soviets took it over.

"Anybody," said Kissling, when Alexandrov's back was turned, "anybody can put the paint on the picture, but that does not make the good picture, no? I think no. Perhaps it is the forgery. You must get over the surface."

I don't think Kissling liked the Russians. I didn't see enough to be sure whether his pronouncement was wise or not; perhaps it didn't matter. For what I did get—pushed right inside me, so that I really felt it—was that Soviet Russia was as tough as nails, tough and hard enough and ambitious enough for anything that came up. You can almost build a country on those keystones alone.

The Germans have done, anyway.

THE STALIN LINE

Chapter 12

ON THE LAST DAY BUT ONE we saw our first hills for many days, dim blots on the horizon. They were like the sentinels of the Stalin Line.

Here before us lay the biggest of the Soviet arsenals apart from Moscow itself and the Ukraine—a great arsenal of war, and a great natural barrier, too. Before we came to the industrial districts with their miles of chimneys and factories we passed through valleys which must have been lovely in summertime. Though still cold, it was definitely warmer. The snow was crisper and deeper—not the hard, frozen ice-snow we had been so accustomed to seeing on the ground. Many of the hillsides were heavily wooded—firs and other trees—and the snow lay an inch deep on every branch and twig.

The Urals stretch from north to south, from the Arctic Ocean to the Caspian Sea—a great natural barrier a thousand miles or so away from the fighting of last winter. And Stalin is the man who planned events so that in the Urals the Soviets should establish their main defensive base—the line that should never be broken—complete with all the workshops and the tools to feed the armies of Soviet Russia.

I don't suppose it ever will be broken—I think that prophecy is fairly safe to make. It is heavily defended in depth, not only on the mountain ranges themselves, but for five hundred miles to the west.

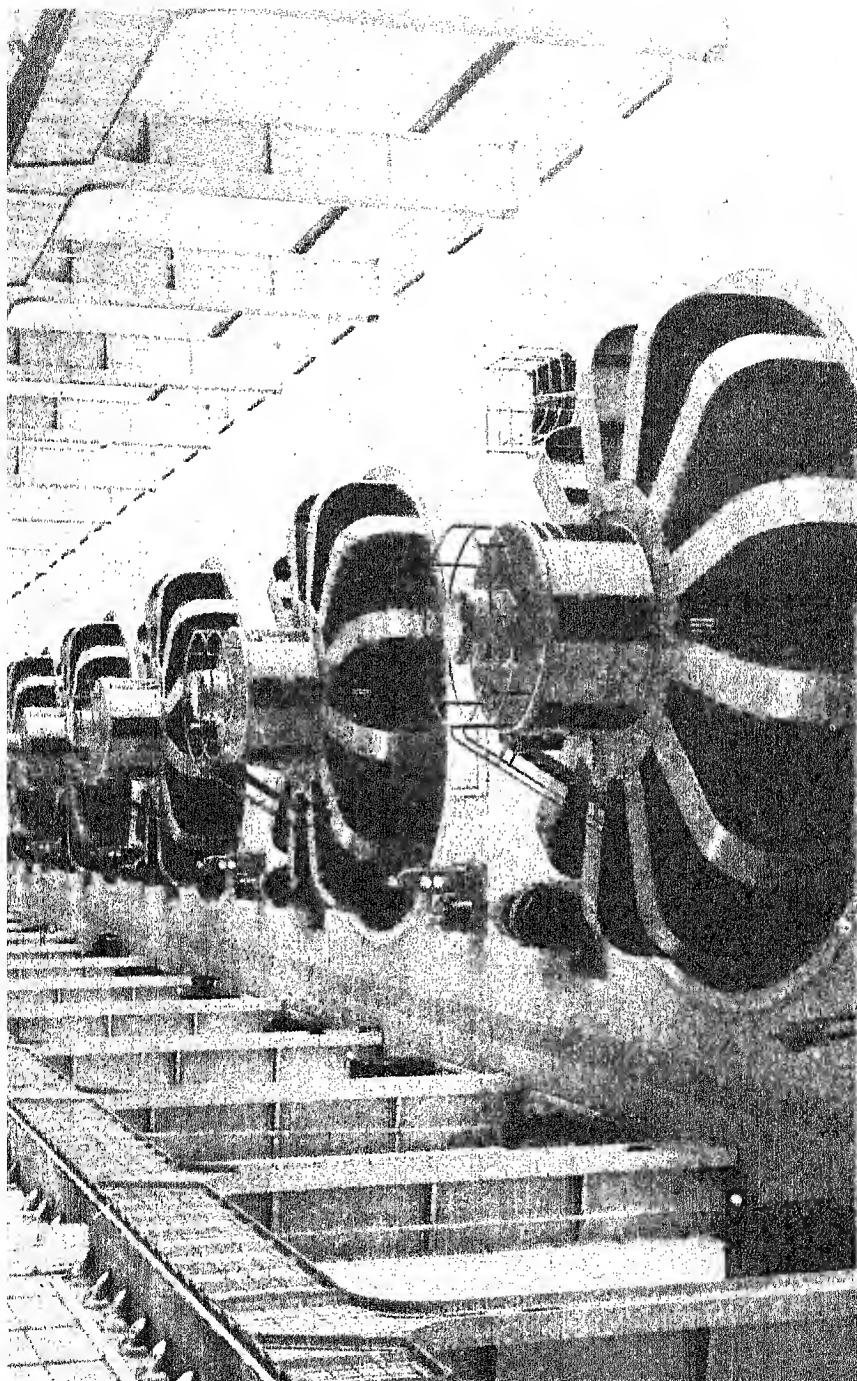
"The Kuzbas basin," said Alexandrov, "is nothing to the Urals. Here has been the greatest of all our experiments in industry—nothing has ever been done like it in the world before. Not on the same scale."

About three o'clock in the afternoon we puffed into the big modern station at Sverdlovsk, administrative centre of the Urals, steel heart of modern Russia—the

TOVARICH

A typical Soviet workman
in his winter clothes.





Sheffield of Russia, and about the same size as our Sheffield. The train was not due out for at least two or three hours, said Alexandrov. He used his influence, and we were allowed passes to go into the town.

It was the most modern town I had seen since Shanghai—Dairen included. The streets were white and clean, and tram-cars clanged down most of them. There were stone buildings ten or a dozen stories high—all post-Revolutionary buildings, remember. There was a magnificent civic centre—and near it, sand and bricks heaped on the side of the road where yet another building was to rise.

Before the revolution Sverdlovsk was a sleepy Russian town of about 75,000 people. Now its population is nearly half a million. It is the chief one of a number of towns and cities that have each increased *threefold* between 1926 and 1939. They are worth examining. First of all, take Sverdlovsk. The 75,000 people had increased to 140,000 by 1926; now that figure has shot up to 450,000 (more now, with the eastern industrial trek). The city has workers in dozens of different types of armaments factories, or factories which could quickly be turned over to war production, the most important being the great concern of Uralnashzavod, a heavy machine-building plant which is probably the biggest of its kind in the world.

In 1939 its output ranged from steel-works and mine equipment to oil-drilling plant and machine tools of many different types. At Sverdlovsk, too, there are vital metallurgical, chemical, and engineering workshops, while grouped around it, within a radius of fifty miles or so, are dozens of smaller towns each producing important materials—towns like Nizhne-Issetzky and Nizhne-Sergy, which together smelt more copper than the whole of Nazi Germany; Pyshina, which has also a great copper refinery; Polevsky, which produces synthetic cryolite—extremely important in aluminium production; and Asbest, where the richest asbestos yield is.

North of Sverdlovsk there is the town of Nizhne-Tagil, which has increased its population from 40,000 to 160,000—in

other words, the town is four times as big as it was in 1926.

POWER

Great turbines installed by the Soviets.

Its great rolling-mills have a capacity of 650,000 tons of sheet steel a year, and it has the world's biggest plant for railway rolling-stock. In a single year it can quite easily turn out 80,000 trucks and carriages.

South there is the town of Kamensk-Uralsky. Its population has leapt from 5000 to 50,000—and it is even more important than its size suggests, for it is the site of the big Ural aluminium smelter. Now that the western plants have gone, it is vital. All its materials—the bauxite, the cryolite, and the electrodes—can be obtained from the Urals.

Then there is Chelyabinsk whose population has increased from 60,000 to 275,000. It has the world's biggest tractor plant (with 50,000 workers now making tanks) and its great ferro-alloy plant, which produces special steel for armour-plating, gets all its nickel, ferro-chrome, wolfram, molybdenum, and other alloy metals from deposits in the Urals—another instance of light metals which Germany sorely needs, but cannot get west of the Urals.

So you can go on. The list becomes a catalogue. And the most exciting I have left to the last. Magnitogorsk. In 1926 Magnitogorsk simply did not exist. It was steppe. Now, a quarter of a million people live there—in an entirely new city which has its schools, hospitals, public buildings, clubs, sports grounds, tram-cars—in fact, everything. In many ways Magnitogorsk is the most fascinating of the new cities of Soviet Russia. Its rise has certainly been most spectacular, and terrific difficulties had to be overcome before the city really got into production. At first all the coal had to come from the Kuzbas region more than a thousand miles to the east—far too big a haul really for such an important and basic raw material: it slowed up production enormously. Now, however, the coal comes from the comparatively near-by field of Karaganda, which produces first-class coking coal.

The steel plant at Magnitogorsk—which before the war produced a third of Russia's iron ore from the Magnet Mountain—is the largest single new development in the Urals, and together with the plant at Nizhne-Tagil produces a quarter of all the steel in the Soviet Union.

This is a rosy picture—most of it was given to me by

people who did not want to put forward the deficiencies. But in Russia, just as in Britain, industry is not perfect.

One wise old man on the train, travelling the day's journey to Moscow, shrugged his shoulders when I mentioned how impressed I had been with Sverdlovsk.

"It is coming on," he said, "but it should be better. It will have to be better. We have had a lot of trouble with labour and with coal. We haven't been getting enough coal to keep the steel furnaces going full blast, so the development has been lop-sided. Labour troubles naturally develop when you get lop-sided production. The men and women want to work harder, and they can't. That leads to friction.

"We are overcoming it. By 1941 we should have got the Urals so that they are giving their best. And of course, it has been a criminal shame that they were never properly developed until we started to attend to them. There's nowhere in the *world* that has so many riches for the taking. Iron, copper, platinum, all the alloy metals, coal near at hand—if only there had been some development there before the Revolution. How much easier our job would have been.

"But you see, we had to build cities before we could build factories. We had to get machinery to build factories before we could get machinery to make steel. We couldn't start to produce, because we hadn't got the means of production. We had to produce those means first. It's a long job. But we're getting to the end of it. It'll be running smoothly in another couple of years or so."

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In Sverdlovsk I paid a brief visit to the offices of the local Commissar of Heavy Industry, and in a bare cream-painted wall, centrally heated, and covered with blue-prints and diagrams, an obliging youngster who spoke excellent school English tried to give me as much information as I wanted. I was particularly anxious to get some official figures of the percentages of raw materials from the Urals eastward—in other words, raw materials which are to-day safe from Hitler. These are the figures he gave me: a list of the more important raw materials.

| <i>Percentage east of the Urals</i> | | |
|---|---------------|--|
| Oil | 14 | |
| Iron ore | 30 | |
| Steel | 35 | |
| Coal | 35 | |
| Copper | 90 | |
| Lead | 90 | |
| Manganese ore | 7 | |
| Nickel | 56 | |
| Chrome ore | 100 (approx.) | |
| Aluminium | 40 | |
| Asbestos | 97 | |

These are big figures. But, as he pointed out, they only tell one part of the story. They do not tell the story of the reserves that are still waiting to be exploited.

The youngster went out and brought me a glass of tea—a very pleasant gesture. “You always drink tea in England?” he asked. I told him I always seemed to be drinking tea in Russia.

“I am studying to be an economist,” he said. “Here are some figures which will interest you. In 1928, soon after the start of the first Five Year Plan, the capital investment in large-scale industry in the Urals was 799 million roubles. In 1932 it had risen to 1,873 millions, and last year it was 5,286 millions. That shows you more clearly than any other figures the enormous growth.”

“It doesn’t mean much to me,” I said, “except as a comparison. If you can explain to me what a rouble is worth then you will be teaching me something!”

But he couldn’t do that. He *said* he did, but I still didn’t understand.

For a start, I asked him what were the average wages of the workers in the Ural factories.

“They vary,” he said. “I suppose the average unskilled worker gets about 150 to 200 roubles a month. But a highly skilled worker gets anything from 450 to 700 roubles a month. Big executives get even more.”

That was the one and only time I ever tied a Soviet official down to definite figures of earnings for Soviet workers.

"Supposing a man is getting 200 roubles a month," I said. "How can he possibly afford to pay ten or twelve roubles for a meal on a train—and not a particularly good meal either?"

"He can't," admitted the official quite frankly. "Tell me, your unskilled working classes—do they eat meals in trains?"

They don't, of course.

"Look at it this way," he agreed. "What's an average low wage for an unskilled worker in your country—strike a low one, because two hundred roubles a month is low over here."

I said £2 10s. a week.

"That," he said triumphantly, "is ten pounds a month—two hundred shillings. I know a lot of our things are a lot more expensive than in your country, but you must take two things into consideration. Your wage-earner is usually the sole supporter of the family. Our wage-earner never is, unless he's a single man in which case he can manage all right. His wife is earning too. A married couple should earn at least five hundred roubles between them—many couples earn over a thousand between them.

"That's the first point. The second is that your workman has to pay terribly high rents. For instance, your colliery owners have put up a lot of houses which they force him to live in at high rents, while our people pay only a very small percentage of their earnings in rent. Very small indeed. So you can see, their money goes further than it does in England doesn't it?"

It *sounded* all right. That young man will one day be a first-class economist. I am sure, but I still can't understand beer at five or six shillings a glass, milk at 1s. 4d. a pint (if obtainable), and shoes at £10 a pair. Or even forgetting English values, I can't even understand beer at six roubles a glass out of the average earnings of the Soviet man or woman, or a suit costing 300 roubles—more than a month's wage.

One thing must certainly not be forgotten, though the economist forgot to mention it. In addition to rents and duplicate earnings, the organizations at factories and collective farms provide an enormous amount of free entertainment. You can learn to fly for nothing, your sports are free, your ski-ing in winter, your swimming in summer—they all cost

nothing. Education too. Medical services too. In some factories, I was told, cinema shows are given every week—free too. When you get a certain amount of pleasure for nothing the time arrives when there are only two things on which to spend your money—clothes and food. The Russian can spend his earnings up to the limit—he has none of that harrowing and worrying task of saving a bit in case his wife is suddenly taken ill, or putting so much aside for the day when his son wants to be educated in the best possible circumstances. That is one of the smartest ways in which the wage-slaves of the British middle classes are tied to their desks and their salary envelopes: fear of the future. It does not apply in Soviet Russia.

You see, you can't get away from facts. I walked out of that official building wondering whether this salary business was sound or whether it was all hooley—whether the civilian in Russia was underpaid while the soldier had plenty of money (I was judging that by the amount they seemed to spend on the train).

But when I walked into a big store, it was jammed full—and with civilians, too. It was in the main street, a big, vigorous thriving departmental store with its various compartments arranged as neatly and efficiently as in London or New York. There was not the glamour there, in the way of chromium and pink glass, but the goods were there—and *the customers were there*. They were buying at almost every counter—buying things which I couldn't possibly have afforded. There was a snack-bar restaurant on one floor—it was crowded. Men and women in their drab black coats and hats—many of them still in felt boots—were eating and drinking heartily. Some of them had children with them—sucking the Soviet equivalent of ice-cream, no doubt.

It was the same in other shops. All the people seemed to have plenty of money to spend, and plenty of goods to spend it upon—though much of the goods had nothing like the finished and polished appearance of those you see in England. Shoes, for instance, were built strongly and looked what they were for—to walk in, and not merely gaudy ornaments for bulging women's feet. Suits were thick and solidly built,

more or less without any refinements. I noticed on one suit that was on display that the machine cotton did not match the cloth properly—you could see it quite distinctly; it was rather like very thin twine to look at and would never have passed examination in any British shop; but the suit was thick enough for anybody, and the cloth looked hard-wearing and durable.

I noticed in the shops at Sverdlovsk a fair degree of standardization—not a very large range of colours and of styles. Perhaps that was inevitable in such a dour and comfortless climate. Fashions might well be much brighter in the shops when the summer comes.

Altogether, Sverdlovsk was an impressively busy and wealthy city. It was not beautiful, except in odd spots—there was always a factory round most of the corners and a chimney-stack—or rather, a dozen chimney-stacks—on the skyline. There were quite a number of cars though—the best-looking cars were the Russian-built Zis cars, modelled, I was told, on the American Buicks. They looked fast good-quality cars. There were smaller cars as well—I do not know the makes of them. I saw no English cars, of course, and for that matter no American models either.

Some of the roads in Sverdlovsk were tarred; others were like the streets of Manchester—stone setts. Many of the pavements had not been finished and were just loose flags set roughly in the ground; they moved as you stepped on them. They were all right in the snow, but they must have been very dirty in the spring and autumn rains.

One of the most ironical things about Sverdlovsk is that a very large amount of the expansion that is aiding Soviet Russia so much to-day was directed by the Germans. The Uralmashzavod plant, which is bigger than the Krupps plant, and which has about seventy thousand workers, had all its original machinery from Germany, while German engineers played a vital part in projecting the factory and getting it into working order.

To add to the irony, a number of the first high Soviet

engineers detailed to work in the plant were actually trained at Krupps and at other German machine factories. I don't know whether the German Government ever wanted its trained engineers to work in Soviet Russia, but the Soviet Government doubtless offered them ~~such~~ large sums that they could not very well refuse. As, indeed, they offered good posts to our own men—the Vickers men, for example. Monkhouse, one of the Britishers involved in the sensational trial a few years ago in Russia, was getting between two and three thousand pounds a year—an odd comparison with the Soviet's 700 roubles a month, but I won't try to unravel that strand again!

The Britishers there must have done a lot of good, but it is very satisfactory now to think that German-made machines, German-trained engineers, and German tools are now satisfactorily killing off countless Germans on the Eastern front. War certainly is indivisible.

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We can thank Stalin for the foresight in developing the Urals. A Soviet engineer told me long before we reached Sverdlovsk that Stalin's was the brain behind the whole scheme—particularly the brain behind the opening up of the Karaganda coalfield, without which the Urals would not be able to operate so smoothly to-day.

Certainly it is to-day a perfect switching centre—with reasonably good railway tentacles striking out both east and west, it is a great G.H.Q. and base for an army fighting either in the east or the west. I don't know which enemy the Russians had in mind when developing the Urals—Germany or Japan; probably, being realists, both. Anyway, the base can be used just as well to feed an army on either side, and to feed not only an army, but production units on either side. The Urals have for a long time been feeding not only the factories of Moscow and the Ukraine, but the factories of the Far East. Those round Vladivostok are not so well situated for certain raw materials as the Ural workshops, and many vital materials have been sent, month after month, along the Trans-Siberian to Vladivostok and surrounding towns.

And you can thank Stalin for it. For a long time while the project was being conceived he had to fight bitter opposition. He persisted. When at last the plan had been started—the first of the Five Year Plans as applied to the Urals—the labour troubles and raw materials problems threatened to wreck the whole scheme. Time and again it was nearly, but not quite, abandoned. Stalin was the man who saw that the plan went through to the end. Conditions in towns like Magnitogorsk and Sverdlovsk were at first frightful. There were no proper housing facilities, no public buildings, people were half starved—yet Stalin urged them to overcome these obstacles, to live through five or ten lean years to reap the harvest of steel and iron and coal and aluminium. Now, at last, the world can see how right he was, and how immensely valuable is the Stalin Line of the Urals.

Now, at war, the Urals are really only short of one thing—machine tools. Those tools, which must be geared to a five-thousandth of an inch, must come from Britain and America. Only by regular deliveries from our two countries can production in Russia be increased—and, however much Russia has done in the way of developing these new areas, remember that they only produced, when the war broke out, about half of the country's normal engineering capacity. The Ukraine, Leningrad, Moscow—those losses have to be made up. Factories in the Urals have to be geared and speeded up to increase production by a 100 per cent.—even more, because the gigantic losses of war have to be taken into account as well. In the interim period the Allies are sending the goods to Russia. But they must send the tools to make the goods as well, and the experts to work the tools. In other words, they must help to defend the Stalin Line.

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It was near the Urals that I remembered the words of the little schoolmaster I had talked with so long and so earnestly near Novosibirsk, the man who told me all about the problem of solving race distinctions in modern Russia. I remembered him when I saw two lovely Kazakh girls who had come up from the wild country south of Karaganda, joined the Trans-

Siberian in the Urals, and were going to Moscow to study at the State Conservatory of Music.

They were shy and wild-eyed. They looked about fifteen or sixteen, but they might have been five or six years older—I couldn't tell—and their blue-black hair was parted in the middle, fitting close to their heads. Lovely creatures. Their features reminded me very much of the Red Indian of the United States—they were sharp, well chiselled, strong—and beautiful. But they were very shy. They were travelling hard-class, and for the most part they sat on their wooden bunks chattering to each other and eating black bread and butter.

Of course the Kazakhs are magnificently musical, and these girls were just following up their normal bent, but the point is that in the old days only one out of every hundred people in Kazakhstan could read or write, let alone read music enough to make it a career like these girls. Yet there they were, all the time with some of the most stirring music of the world locked in their souls through lack of education and opportunity. And while we were in Moscow the Kazakhs gave their own concert in one of Moscow's largest theatres—and packed the place to capacity night after night, even though the audience could not understand a word of their songs.

It was near the Urals, too, that a party of Turkomans boarded the train for four hours—they were easily the most colourful and bright people we had seen since the Tartars. Where they were going, what they were doing, we never discovered. My diary records that they got on at a place called Yalutorovsk, five or six hundred miles west of Omsk—a small wayside halt. They must have come north from central Asia and joined the train there.

Alexandrov pointed them out (with the one laconic word "Turkoman") as the train drew into the snowy platform for a five-minute halt.

They looked like one family—father, mother, two children—and we saw the most wonderful clothes, once they had taken off their fur coats and were settled down in their hard-class compartment. I wandered through the coaches until I came across them, sitting down, eating hard and drinking

something that looked suspiciously like vodka—children and all.

The father wore a huge white fur hat that stood on his head like a busby, and he had a long flowing brocaded gown, opened all the way down the front, rather like a dressing-gown, with some white cloth behind it. In startling contrast to his white hat, his eyebrows were thick and bushy, and as black as ink. He didn't look unlike George Raft.

The mother wore a great hat like an embroidered pork pie—beautifully embroidered; and she had on a lovely smock, with the most gorgeous needlework down the front. Once again there was the look of the Red Indian about the woman, just as there had been with the Kazakh girls, and the likeness was even more pronounced in the two daughters—I suppose they were daughters. They were lovely—dark-skinned, magnificent features; they had not grown old like their parents. They had beautiful eyes, very strong eyebrows, and great pigtails of black hair—jet black—hanging down over their firm breasts. They wore brightly coloured shawls over their shoulders, and their smocks were tight at their wrists.

For an hour I tried to find somebody among the Russians who would talk to them for me. I thought there might be an Intourist man—they often popped on and off the train. Alexandrov I couldn't find—he was probably asleep. So I couldn't get any further with them. But I should have liked to talk, even through an interpreter, to them, particularly the raven girls.

Lucky girls—the Soviets certainly gave them a chance to travel on a train, to be treated as equal human beings, for if women have helped to make Soviet Russia what it is to-day Russia has equally helped to make the women of that continent what *they* are to-day.

Those two Turkoman girls, for instance—what would have happened to them under the old Tsarist *régime*? They would have been married off to the highest bidder—that was the general custom as soon as a girl was old enough to bear children. The parents looked about, passed the word round among the fathers of the young men of the village, and those two handsome girls would doubtless have fetched a handsome

price—they deserved one. Once married, no strange man ever saw their face again. They would be kept in the background, and if they were allowed to venture out they would have to wear veils. But usually they stayed in the background as the slaves of the men who had bought them, and who treated them with nothing much but contempt.

Seeing those girls there, looking so lovely and so *free*, started my mind on a train of thought. Nothing struck me quite so much in Russia as the part played by women—the *enthusiastic* part, not the mere ordered work, though that was doubtless there. No, I mean the feeling that seemed to spring from the women themselves—the feeling that they thoroughly enjoyed their share in this great new adventure of helping to build, to rule, and in some measure to control the destinies of modern Russia. I wasn't relying on what women had told me, for that might easily have been propaganda. I just had the feeling.

"Don't you think," I asked Natasha that night, "that it isn't all idealism, what you women are doing—that after years of semi-slavery you've all seen suddenly what a magnificent chance you've got, and once and for all, you're going to make certain that you'll never be in the same position again. Don't you think that's at the bottom of this enthusiasm for work and equality?"

Natasha smiled a little. She hummed and hawed. How women the world over hate to part from that word idealism! Particularly when they're the most mercenary creatures on God's earth. . . .

But I am sure I am right. Never again, said the women, remembering the forced marriages, the contempt in which they were held. And if the women of a nation make up their minds nothing will stop them. They were as strong as Russia; as strong as the Stalin Line over which the Trans-Siberian was at that moment passing.

THE LAST DAY

Chapter 13

WE WERE OVER THE STALIN LINE NOW. Sverdlovsk was behind us, the Ural Mountains were behind us, Asia was behind us. It had been an odd feeling, crossing from one continent to another, though we never quite knew when we did it. But now journey's end was only a day ahead. Moscow. Then different trains to different places. The lives we had all shared for such a brief spell would branch out as we all went our different ways.

"I'm really beginning to feel quite sorry and upset," said Helen.

So was I, though there was an undercurrent of excitement. Moscow did really bring home to me for the first time that we were no longer far from England. I had been a whole year wandering around the tropics, through China, and then, lastly, this trip; and now, very soon, bacon and eggs in England, Cockney accents, good cigarettes—I was beginning to get rather nostalgic for them all. Particularly good cigarettes. We had more or less finished the vile cigarettes we bought in Manchukuo, and were reduced to about five a day each plus an odd packet or two of Russian ones which we bought—but they were really hardly fit to smoke, and if you ran about with them in your pocket, most of the tobacco seemed to fall out of the cigarettes, it was so fine.

Kissling was sorrier than any of us to see the end of the journey—I think that every mile the train carried us from China gave him a physical pain! He was staying a couple of days in Moscow to delay the meeting with his spouse still further. Poor Kissling—his was a typical married man's story, and he had to work out his own salvation.

We were due to arrive in Moscow at about eight o'clock in the morning, so all the last day was spent eating and

drinking and rushing last-minute chess matches through. There was no time even for argument, though, of course, Natasha tried to do a bit in between times. There was all the packing to be done too—and it was astonishing how difficult it was to get all our clothes into the suitcases in which we had brought them into the train. It was a queer feeling, too, on that last day, laying out clean clothes for the morning, throwing in a corner all the old and filthy clothes we had worn since we left Harbin so long ago. Vests, shirts, socks—I hadn't changed them for a fortnight, not that it seemed to matter. I felt just as clean as I did years before when, fishing off the coast of Iceland, I never took my clothes off once for three weeks. It's all a question of habit.

Still, a bath was something I was definitely looking forward to. And Helen even more so. We did not eventually leave our dirty clothes in a corner of our compartment, but shared them out among a number of the guards—socks to one, Helen's underclothes to another, my shirts to a third, and so on. The way those guards took those clothes was pathetic—they were far more valuable than if we had given them each twenty roubles; far more. Here was something *in kind*, easily the most practicable form of tipping in a country like Russia where clothes are costly. If only we'd known at the beginning! On the last day the guards, having received their clothes, ran out three times to fill my tea-pot for me! It left rather a funny taste in my mouth—not the tea, but the way they ran for it. Help-yourself Communism dropped a peg or two for a few minutes, though I suppose that they were genuinely so pleased and grateful that it was their way of showing it.

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On that last day we actually persuaded Alexandrov to have lunch with us—and Kissling. How the Russians hated the Germans even then: written now, that sounds a bit like being wise after the event, but it isn't. We really had the greatest difficulty in getting Alexandrov to eat at the same table. Alexandrov, of course, was quite perplexed that we would have anything to do with Kissling—I suppose it *was* per-

plexing to a straightforward mind like Alexandrov's. Munich a few months in the past, inevitable war a few months in the future—even as we approached Moscow the banners were screaming war, and the dictators of Europe were mouthing their threats with more foam and venom than ever. Yet there we were talking to Kissling—it was beyond Alexandrov's comprehension.

That last spread was terrific. We ate and ate, and drank a whole bottle of vodka, and in the end joined (as best we could) in community singing with all the soldiers in the dining-saloon, who kept on sitting there, singing away, despite the fact that there was a long queue for meals in the corridor outside. Neither the diners nor the queuers seemed very worried.

An odd thing happened after that meal. We found that we had one meal ticket left which we should not need. So, with Alexandrov as interpreter, we asked the little waiter if he could give us anything for it. We expected perhaps a couple of bars of chocolate, or at any rate, something very small. In five minutes back came the waiter with a two-pound jam jar, packed full to the brim with black caviar—*black caviar*.

"But that costs forty roubles a pound," I gasped to Alexandrov. "There must be two or three pounds in that jar—and our meal ticket only cost the equivalent of two or three roubles in Shanghai."

But he didn't seem very worried. And the waiter seemed to think the jar of caviar was a fair exchange for the small slip of grubby paper. But—and this is perfectly true—it was the only time on the whole trip that we ever saw black caviar; all the caviar we saw was the cheap red variety. We took the jar through to Germany, where some friends lent us enough money to get back to England—they nearly cried when they saw it: they hadn't seen caviar for three years.

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It took us nearly an hour on that last day filling in (in triplicate) the necessary forms to enable us to leave the train. "I wonder," asked Helen, "what would happen if we refused to fill them in. They couldn't keep us on the train for ever?"

"Don't be too sure," answered Alexandrov, who, as I have said, had a very dry sense of humour.

I hope, with this war, that Russia has got over its form-filling passion. The dotted-line fever was gripping the country when we passed through—not only for us, the foreigners. There always seemed to be four or five different bills for the lunches in the restaurant-car and other similar places—I was always surprised we didn't have to sign a chit for our free hot water. . . . It can hold up a nation quite a lot, this frenzy for the written word—the sort of custom which makes you have to sign for some ammunition before you can use it while the enemy is approaching; but I think the Soviets are realists—they might let forms interfere a little with peace, but surely they wouldn't let it interfere with war.

When we had filled all ours in they were collected by an Intourist man who had boarded the train to shepherd us into Moscow, and we took the opportunity of telling him flatly that there was a man on the train who was dying. That was Hansen. He hadn't been up for three days now, and every day he was getting worse.

The Intourist man was quick to act. He left our compartment, went to look at Hansen, took one look—that was more than enough to tell the whole story—and left, returning shortly with an army doctor who was on the train.

Hansen started to curse in German, and tried to sit up and expostulate, but it was no good—he was too weak to sit up—and the doctor went out into the corridor, fumbled in a bag, took out a hypodermic syringe, went back and without a word jabbed it in Hansen's arm. Poor fellow—he was too tired to resist.

We stopped and talked to him for a few minutes—he was even too tired to give us any propaganda. We talked a bit about London, about his days there, and he became quite flattering. He had had some good times, he said, though, of course, even then the Jews . . . etc., etc.

As he got more and more sleepy he said less and less. Finally his eyes closed, and the doctor hustled us from the room. We never saw him again, except for the sight of a stretcher being carried down the long platform in Moscow.

Yes, it was quite sad, that last day. Our tiny six-by-three compartment suddenly seemed much larger and better furnished than it had ever been before, and when I went into the closet for a shave and found that there actually was running water there was no room for any criticism. I had a good shave late at night, and a good wash too. Then we packed all our things except our clothes for the morning, leaving only our pyjamas to go in on top of our suitcases.

We spent the last night—half a dozen or more of us—sitting in our compartment, talking, singing a bit, having an odd game of chess. More than anything else, I loved the way Natasha's eyes were shining. Talk about not minding being parted from her husband! She was just crazy about this engine-driver of hers—and I was glad to see it too. Admire the industry of Soviet women if you like, but a world populated by earnest women would be dull indeed—give me a woman with a sparkle in her eyes and a slight catch in her breath when you walk into a room, and I'll do all the work.

To Alexandrov, of course, the end of the journey meant a great deal, but he was an officer in the glorious Red Army, and he seemed to think that dignity should remain uppermost and that he should carry on with his poker face until the end of the trip. Saratova was the most cheerful of the lot. She was genuinely excited about a holiday in Moscow. She was full of everything she was going to do, and her jolly fat frame shook with excited laughter, and her flaccid countenance went as round as a full moon—when she laughed, she *did* look exactly like a full moon, with the man in it too.

They all came in, and the Alexandrov-Kissling truce was observed by the others too. Indeed, Kissling actually attempted to sing a German song, and though there was no actual opposition, the talking was so loud—so carefully loud—that his effort trailed off. A good job. He had no voice.

Alexandrov bought us all a bottle of vodka—handsome of him, I thought, and we took it in turns to drink the hot fiery spirit out of our three cups. The clock went on and on until finally it was half-past three. Then we stopped.

The last of the 'guests' departed—Natasha and Anton

singing, without a word of protest from the neighbouring compartments—and Helen and I got undressed.

"I shan't forget *that* night in a hurry," I said.

Then we both turned in and went straight to sleep.

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The one thing about vodka is that it leaves no unpleasant taste in your mouth. Somebody knocked on our door at seven the following morning, and I scrambled out and looked through the window. Moscow an hour ahead. We were passing through fairly heavily populated country—not big towns, but fairly big houses dotted about, and now and again an odd factory or something that looked like a factory. The snow was thicker on the ground—it was now really powdery, Christmas card snow, that hung on the branches of the little copses and spinneys through which the train rumbled.

"If you watch carefully," said Intourist, "you might be able to see the towers of the Kremlin—that is a wonderful first sight."

It must be—to see it as Napoleon saw it, Eastern cupolas in the morning mist. But we never saw them. One minute we were in the country, the next minute—just as when you approach the outskirts of London—the fields and woods were giving way to orderly rows of houses, and glimpses of streets and more and more factories, of people walking busily to their offices and workshops, of occasional cars.

"We're there," I cried to Helen. "This is it—Moscow."

"I hope not," she said practically. "We've got to have breakfast first."

We had invited Kissling in for the last breakfast—a whole tin of pineapple chunks between the three of us, followed by chocolate or plain biscuits, with marmalade to taste, all washed down by tea brewed the previous night. It still tasted good.

"This a nasty trip is not," declared Kissling between huge mouthfuls of chocolate biscuit. "I am not glad it is ended."

But it was doing—very quickly. There was a stop or two on the outskirts—once on a raised embankment which gave

us an excellent view of a large area of the city: not all of it, I was surprised to see, white. Quite a lot of the snow had either been swept away or had melted—I think the former, for it was still quite cold.

Then at last we jolted forward for the last time. Our bags were packed and ready to be carried out. The houses got more and more frequent, the streets more and more crowded, the small double track sprouted and branched until we were in the centre of a great mass of railway lines. Then finally we drew into the long grey stone station of Moscow Central. The old Trans-Siberian gave a sigh of content, a last puff of achievement, and drew to a standstill. We pushed open the corridor door, and stepped down on to the flat grey stone as Moscow—just to have a look round before grabbing our bags.

There is something very final about a railway terminus. Every door on the train—still white with snow, though the ice had disappeared—was thrown open, and people were scrambling out.

I held out my hand to Alexandrov. "Is your wife-to-be here to meet you?" asked Helen.

He shook his head. "She didn't know the exact train I was catching. Anyway, she'll probably be working," he said.

We shook hands—he looked a trifle self-conscious as he did it, but he did smile just once, as he said good-bye to Helen. It was the only time I saw him smile—and the fleeting movement of his lips was gone in a moment. Then he was striding down the platform, a strong, stocky figure, as tough as nails, a man who was destined somehow and somewhere, to play his part in the future of Russia, and so of the world.

Natasha's husband was there to meet her—a shy, tousle-haired young man with a bright grin. He didn't look at all like an engine-driver. There also was the daughter-in-law of Anton and Saratova—just as shy. Saratova was all beams and chuckles, while Anton sucked his empty pipe stolidly. Then they too went.

From farther up the train we saw—just a glimpse—a stretcher being lifted out through the doorway. That would be Hansen. We never heard what happened to him,

whether he lived to see his beloved Kiel or not, or whether he died.

Then the kind-faced old nun bustled up, and said good-bye to me in Swedish, and shook Helen warmly by the hand. The old hatchet-faced one followed and nodded briefly, and Sister Rigmor—well, we ended as we started. She looked at me straight in the eyes, and her face went pink, just as it had done the first time I saw her on the cold bareness of Manchouli station.

What a long time ago that seemed. Manchouli, with us buying up all the odds and ends with our last Manchukuo yen. The sight of the Soviet ski troops gliding and twisting and swerving down the wooded hillside; the marvellous sight of Lake Baikal, frozen as we saw it from a slice cut out of the cliff along which we were travelling. Then Irkutsk, and our first glimpse of the real thoroughness of Soviet planned industry, Krasnoyarsk, the Kuzbas Basin, where Genghis Khan forged his weapons for his mighty onslaught on the Western world centuries ago. The two little Turkoman girls we had seen—where were they now, I wondered. Novosibirsk, and the poor old Intourist man there who wasn't quite sure whether the city was better now than when he used to stop and pick roses where street-cars now ran. Yes, it seemed a long time ago. And inside the train, the first chess match, Alexandrov, all the Russians we had met—and Kissling. Here was Kissling to say good-bye. He still wore his two hats, and blinked from behind his big spectacles.

"It is the pleasure to have known you, Mrs Barr!" he said, and then he shook hands with me.

We went back into our compartment to collect our two suitcases, grabbed them, and walked slowly down the station towards the great square outside, and the Moscow Metropole Hotel. We gave up our tickets and passed through the barrier, and so out into the cold, bright square.

